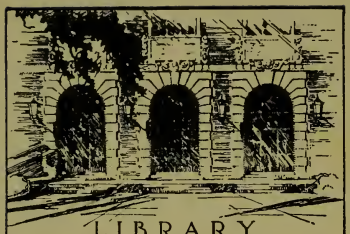
MONTENELLO



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MR MONTENELLO.

MR MONTENELLO:

A ROMANCE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE.

BY

W. A. BAILLIE HAMILTON.

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MR MONTENELLO:

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CHAPTER I.

THE LITTLEBROOK HARRIERS.

Of all the "holiday resorts" within the easy reach of jaded Londoners, who, while possessed with a keen appreciation of the delights of a somewhat wilder scenery than is to be found in the immediate neighbourhood of their native metropolis, are nevertheless prevented by various circumstances from wandering further a-field, it would be difficult to fix upon any district more nearly approaching to real wildness than the long range of downs that stretches away westwards from Beachy Head to within a few miles of Winchester.

There is certainly a great charm about the Southdowns—that peculiar charm which al-

ways seems to associate itself with a pastoral district,—especially in a hill country such as this, where a thinly scattered population, living in and about the old farmhouses, in many cases occupied by the same families for generations back, pass a placid, sleepy existence, which in these feverish and go-ahead times would seem strangely out of place elsewhere. They have a quiet, peaceful character of their own, these grey old hills; and whether seen on a lovely spring morning, with the delicate tints of sunrise stealing over the sea and gradually lighting up each undulating mound and copse-dotted valley;—in the glistening haze of a summer noon, when the golden corn shimmers on the lowlands, and the glare of the chalk cuttings is only partially relieved by the sober green of the downs;—or on a darkening winter's afternoon, when the snow lies deep in the combes, and beats fiercely in the face of the belated wayfarer as he essays to make a line across the open, and can hardly tell one white-shrouded hill from another;—there is always something fresh and ever-changing about them, suggestive of the thought that man is here alone with nature.

Some such reflections may possibly have passed through the minds of two individuals who, towards the close of an early spring afternoon, were seated on an overhanging ledge of a steep hill-side, and watching the expiring efforts of a pack of harriers to puzzle out a rapidly deteriorating scent over a flinty fallow beneath.

The youngest of the two—to whom, as about to become the principal character in our story, we will give precedence in the way of introduction—was a young man of about six-and-twenty, tall, fair-haired, and rather good-looking than otherwise. He was slightly made, and rather too much of the "hop-pole" build to have a really good figure; but at the same time was evidently active and vigorous, and possessed of the full use of his limbs. The chief fault to be found, both in figure and face, was a want of solidity in the one and of decision in the other; and this was a very fair index to his general character.

His companion was about six or seven years older, also tall, but with a figure which, if it had not been spoiled by a slight stoop, would have been a very fine one; and as it

was, the square shoulders and well-knit limbs showed signs of great bodily strength. His hair and complexion were dark, and a thick moustache, in which there were already one or two silvery threads to be seen, concealed the expression of a mouth about which there were unmistakable lines of care and sorrow. A face, in fact, which, although still young, would be apt to strike a keen observer as that of a man "with a history." At the present moment, however, there was no more to be seen of it than was permitted by the peak of a "fore-and-aft" deer-stalking cap, well slouched over his nose, while the expression of his mouth was further modified by the appendage of a short pipe. Both individuals wore rough shooting-suits, with woollen stockings and boots to correspond, and presented all the appearance of a couple of gentleman-like tramps.

"Well," at last observed the younger of the two, after contemplating the proceedings below in silence for some moments, "they won't make much more of that now; and the best thing that old boy in green can do is to blow his horn and take his hounds home."

His companion, who was evidently less interested in the matter, slowly raised himself from the half-recumbent attitude in which he had been indulging, and calmly surveyed the situation.

"Ah, well," he said, in a lazy and contented sort of voice, "I daresay you're right. There must be precious little scent on those flints, I should think. Anyhow, the old fellow seems to be of your opinion, for he's blowing away like blazes now. I'm sure it can't be good for him to go on like that at his time of life."

"Yes, they've turned it up now," said the other. "One or two of those farmers' horses look fairly decent sort of beasts. But here's the animal I want to look at," as an elderly gentleman in black, with drab cords and "butcher" boots, accompanied by a young lady in a dark-brown hat and habit, separated themselves from the now rapidly dispersing field, and turned their horses' heads up a narrow farm road, leading up the combe exactly under where our friends were sitting. The gentleman was mounted on a "confidential" weight-carrying grey cob, while the lady

rode a well-bred-looking chestnut mare, which showed no signs of having by any means had enough of it, and was evidently still rather a "handful" to manage.

"Ah, yes," observed the elder of our friends, "that grey looks just the sort of animal that would carry you or me nicely. Or both of us together," he added, surveying the cob's long broad back.

"No, no," responded his companion, "it's the chestnut I mean, of course. Grey's all well enough, but he don't show much quality. But that chestnut's a well-bred 'un, I'll be bound. Gallop and jump too. Irish, I'm pretty sure."

"Which, the girl or the horse?" lazily inquired his friend, who had again pulled his cap over his eyes, and relapsed into quiet enjoyment of his pipe.

"Why, the horse, of course, you old idiot; you were half asleep, and I suppose you didn't see them come into that last field. There was a bank and ditch there that most of those sportsmen shirked, but that girl came over beautifully, and the mare kicked back on the bank as only an Irish-bred horse would do."

"Ah, she looks as if she could kick back with a vengeance," rejoined the other, "and I shouldn't particularly care about being behind her at the time. However, here they come, so put on your most fascinating grin, my Jerry."

"Yes, what fools we must look, sitting here," muttered his companion. "Smut, you little brute, keep quiet," addressing a "varmint"-looking little fox terrier, with a black patch over one eye, who showed every disposition to resent the approach of strangers by suppressed growling, culminating in a short bark, which, although immediately suppressed by his master, was quite enough to make the chestnut mare prick up her ears, and go through the form of being frightened, involving a dance across the road with her head in the air, and in short behaving in such a manner as to demonstrate that her rider had both good hands and a firm seat. Looking up to the quarter whence the alarm seemed to proceed, the young lady caught sight of our two friends, and blushed slightly as she bent over the chestnut's neck, as if remonstrating with her on such unseemly

behaviour. They passed close under the hill, and it needed vigorous action on the part of Smut's master to restrain him from further hostile demonstrations. But the old gentleman on the grey was evidently not inclined to loiter; and pressing forward at a trot, closely followed by his fair companion, both chestnut mare and brown habit were quickly lost to sight round a turn of the road.

"Well, I must say they make rather a neat pair, Jerry, my boy," observed the elder of our two wayfarers, as he rose to a sitting posture, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "Now the right thing for you to do would be to follow that young woman up and find out all about her. I've no doubt she's no end of an heiress, and you might make an impression, and drop in for a real good thing, you know."

"Rubbish," replied Jerry impatiently, but not without a tinge of self-consciousness in his voice; "what the deuce have I got to do with her? Now then, it's time we were getting on, if we mean to get to Middlehaven to-night, for it's a good five miles further, I fancy, and it will soon be dark now."

"My dear fellow, I was only waiting for

you," rejoined the other, rising to his feet, and yawning placidly. "It would never have done for you to miss seeing that girl, you know. Now then, I suppose we must strike across these old downs again. I wouldn't care to lose my way here on a dark night."

So the two friends, who were on a three days' pedestrian expedition in the South-downs, and proposed to stop for the night at the little seaport town of Middlehaven, resumed their journey, much to the satisfaction of Smut, over the range of undulating hills which still lay between them and their destination. For some distance their road lay across an open expanse of short springy turf, dotted here and there with patches of thick furze, from which the rabbits were already beginning to emerge for their evening nibble. Gradually the day began to close in; and not a sound was to be heard except the occasional tinkle of a sheep bell, or the cry of a peewit flitting along the ground in search of a resting-place for the night. Now and then a hare would dart across the track, occasioning an energetic but futile pursuit on the part of Smut, who would return in a few minutes

breathless and panting, but still by no means convinced as to his inability to enact the part of a greyhound, and quite prepared to repeat the performance on the very next opportunity. After a time the track began to descend towards the valley, and the sweet cool scents of a spring evening came stealing up from the water-meadows below. It was a lovely walk; and tired as our two pedestrians were after a five-and-twenty-mile tramp, they were quite sorry when the lights of Middlehaven began to twinkle in the distance, and they had to leave the wildness of the downs for the commonplace level of the turnpike road.

CHAPTER II.

THE COURTENAY FAMILY.

The Earldom of Weatherby was created, according to that most veracious of chroniclers, Sir Bernard Burke, in the year 1705. We learn that the Honourable Loftus Courtenay, having adopted the legal profession, and attained considerable celebrity at the Bar, was appointed Solictor-General on the 20th of March 1695. He represented the borough of Muddleton in the Convention Parliament, and was subsequently raised to the peerage by the title of Baron of Wigglesthorpe on the 20th of July 1701. But it is clear that there must have been a strong feeling that his claims had been by no means as yet fully recognised; for we find that shortly after the accession of George I. he was created Earl of Weatherby, being moreover in the same year sworn of the Privy Council. It is to be regretted that the subsequent Earls do not

appear to have distinguished themselves to the extent that might have been expected from the descendants of such a legal luminary, for we look in vain for any special record of their achievements. They seem to have been contented with figuring as Lords Lieutenant of counties, High Sheriffs and Custodes Rotulorum, Chairmen of Quarter Sessions, &c., and to have kept aloof to a great extent from public life. Among the younger branches of the family we occasionally find mention of some Courtenay who succeeded in attaining a respectable position as a soldier, sailor, or diplomatist; but we fail to discover any record of exceptionally distinguished services; and the Courtenays seem, as a rule, to have lived and died after the most uneventful and humdrum fashion, possibly considering that they were fulfilling their destiny just as well by taking things easily as by attempting to make a noise in the world.

The representative of the family honours at the time of our story was Almurus de Capel John, eighth Earl, who having unexpectedly succeeded to the title by the drowning of his elder brother while on a boating excursion,

found himself at six and twenty the possessor of a highly respectable title and rent-roll, tolerably free from encumbrances, of about £30,000 a year, with a house in London and a fine old place in Warwickshire.

The fact of being heir-presumptive to his brother had not in any way lessened his opportunities of extending the circle of his acquaintance while still a subaltern in the Guards; and a cheery, sociable disposition, added to a strong turn for flirtation and for making himself generally agreeable, had made him very popular in London drawing-rooms. His sudden accession to the title had the effect, therefore, of raising a flutter in more than one fair bosom, and the interest already taken in him by the mothers of Mayfair and Belgravia might be said to rather increase than diminish. Being, as has been observed, of a good-natured and easy-going disposition, the idea of matrimony did not present itself to him in a particularly objectionable form, and he was quite prepared to look upon it as a matter of course. It was barely a year, therefore, after his succession to the family honours that he discovered that his existence

would no longer be endurable unless he could persuade the charming Lady Constance Dullingham, second daughter of the Earl of Carnforth, to share it with him. No special objection to the proposed arrangement having been raised, either by the lady herself, who had already formed the highest opinion of him from a dancing point of view, or by her noble parents, with whom the cheery young guardsman had always been a great favourite, the preliminary negotiations were settled as smoothly as they ought to be where love, rank, and fortune combine to make things pleasant; and it was not long before as handsome a couple as could have been found in a long summer's day were united at St. George's, Hanover Square, in the presence of an unusually select assemblage, including a contingent of stalwart non-commissioned officers from the bridegroom's regiment, whose devotion to their officer was testified by a valedictory discharge of rice that would have sufficed to keep a fair-sized family in puddings for at least a fortnight.

Lord Weatherby remained in the Guards for two years after his marriage; but finding,

about that time, that the duties which had lately devolved upon him of master of hounds were not altogether compatible with the satisfactory performance of his military avocations, he reluctantly resigned his commission, and proceeded to devote himself almost entirely to country pursuits, and to the society of his charming wife; who, although as fond of dancing as ever, when circumstances did not intervene to render such strong exercise undesirable, was just as happy in the country as her husband, and took a great deal more interest in the performance of his hounds than in the gossip of London drawing-rooms. The house in Hill Street was therefore only tenanted for a short three months in the summer, or on those occasions when it was considered desirable that Lady Weatherby should be under the personal supervision of that eminent practitioner, Dr. Mackenzie of Curzon Street. For little feet were already beginning to toddle about the spacious old corridors at Storrington; and at the time of our story, when Lord and Lady Weatherby had now been married about ten years, they were seriously deliberating whether it might

not be advisable to dispose of the London house, or at any rate to let it until it should be time for a second Lady Constance to bloom upon London society.

Lord Weatherby's immediate family circle was not a large one, being reduced, after his brother's death, to himself and two elder sisters, both of whom had been some time married, and with whom, as in no way connected with our story, it is unnecessary to further trouble our readers. The collateral branches of the Courtenay family were by this time scattered about the country, and, as usual in such cases, had established ties and associations of their own. They had all, as a rule, succeeded in doing pretty well for themselves, either by comfortable marriages, or by a moderate amount of success in the various professions they had adopted; and had in fact earned the reputation of being a highly respectable family, who, without being in the least likely to distinguish themselves, would in all probability do fair credit to any position in which it might please Providence to place them.

Among other brothers and sisters of the

sixth Lord Weatherby, the grandfather of the present lord, was Admiral the Hon. Thomas Courtenay, who, having served his country with more or less zeal and fidelity for about twenty years, had eventually been appointed to a small office about the Court. This gallant seaman, who had married early in life, and had been left a widower while still a young man, had had five children, of whom, however, the eldest alone was now living. The name of this individual was Charles John Courtenay, Esq., and as he is the father of our hero, we may perhaps be allowed to devote a few lines to his description.

Mr Charles John Courtenay was one of those persons about whom it is somewhat difficult to pronounce any positive opinion. At the time we are speaking of, he was about sixty-five years of age, tall, slender, and white-haired, with an unmistakable air of good-breeding, and that appearance of dignity which, in these degenerate days, is always associated with a man who adheres to the good old fashion of voluminous neckcloths and swallow-tail coats. He was of an extremely shy and reserved disposition, and having mixed

but little in society for the last twenty years, was apt to be a little narrow-minded in his views of things in general. He had been originally intended for the diplomatic service, and had, in fact, been actually appointed to an unpaid attaché-ship at Stockholm. But two or three years in the legation did not develop in him any special aptitude for the duties of his profession; and his chief, who was an old friend of his father's, found it necessary to intimate to him pretty plainly that his son was not likely to attain to any great eminence in the diplomatic circles of Europe. On his return to England, therefore, it became a question of some anxiety to the gallant Admiral how to dispose of his first-born, who seemed in a fair way to be thrown upon his hands without any particular disposition or aptitude for taking care of himself. Fortunately, however, an unexpected opening occurred at this moment through the appointment of Lord Weatherby, a painstaking and conscientious statesman of the third order, to the office of Lord Privy Seal. Anxious to help his brother, who had perhaps not thought it necessary to enter too closely into the pre-

cise reasons for his son's retirement from the diplomatic service, he consented to take him as his private secretary; and the duties attaching to this office not being of a particularly arduous or responsible nature, Mr Charles Courtenay continued to discharge them, with much satisfaction to himself and without any great detriment to the public service, for a period of six years. During this time, he had of course, as Lord Weatherby's nephew and private secretary, the *entrée* to the best London society; and although in no sense a *parti*, he was approved of and favourably noticed by a fair proportion of mothers and daughters as a well-connected, good-looking, and well-behaved young man, who might possibly be pushed by the influence of his family into an appointment which would eventually make him worth considering from a matrimonial point of view. With men he was not so popular, his reserved and formal manner causing him to be looked upon as somewhat of a prig. At the same time he considered it necessary to fall in love, like other people; and having succeeded in rendering himself acceptable to the Countess of

Warlingham and her seventh daughter, Lady Theodosia Dutton, a young lady of no special attractions, but of irreproachable character and tractable disposition, whose matrimonial prospects were beginning to cause her mother some anxiety, they were married, despite the subdued grumblings of Lord Warlingham, who had not formed a particularly exalted opinion of his son-in-law, when the latter was about two-and-thirty, and shortly before the Ministry of which Lord Weatherby was a member went out of office.

But whatever expectations might have been formed as to Mr Charles Courtenay's success in an official career, they were not altogether justified by results. For either no suitable opening presented itself at the supreme moment when the outgoing Government were setting their house in order and filling up every available vacancy by the appointment of their own supporters, or else the quondam private secretary's performances had not been such as to justify even an uncle in forcing him upon the public as an assistant-commissioner or under-secretary; for the utmost that Lord Weatherby was able or willing to do

for his nephew was to procure for him a sub-inspectorship of collieries, with the modest salary of £300 a year. But even a sub-inspectorship was, of course, better than nothing; and with the help of a liberal allowance from his father, and by means of living on their relations to the utmost extent that could be tolerated, the Courtenays contrived to eke out a tolerably comfortable though somewhat desultory existence for the next four or five years, when, by the death of his father, Charles Courtenay came into a small independence of about £1200 a year and a small house in Park Street, Grosvenor Square.

This accession of wealth furnished him with an excuse for finally relinquishing the public service, and, after some consideration, he came to the conclusion that his dignity would be best supported and his means rendered most available by a residence in the country. In this view Lady Theodosia, who was blessed with an implicit belief in her husband, and who neither cared for nor was in any way adapted to London society, entirely concurred; and after some looking about, they settled upon a large roomy house, with a few acres of

land about it, in the north of Somersetshire, where, at the time of our story, they had lived for about twenty-five years.

Their family by this time consisted of two sons and a daughter. The eldest, Charles, was in the Rifle Brigade, and at present with his battalion in India. Gerard and his sister Katharine were twins, and about four years younger than their brother. A great attachment had always existed between them ; and it was with anything but satisfaction that Gerard had a few years previously seen his sister borne away from the family circle by a rich young banker, Mr Tobias Thornton, of Leadenhall Street and Westwood Hall, Hertfordshire, thus leaving him the only one regularly at home.

The question of Gerard's profession had always been one of some difficulty. He had not shown any predilection for one line of life more than another, and had, in fact, no very fixed ideas on the subject. The army had never even been suggested to him, as it was a sort of understood thing that one soldier in the family was quite enough. He had never passed through the usual boyish phase of wishing to be a sailor ; and his destiny was

evidently, therefore, in the civil walks of life. Even here, however, he could not be got to express any decided opinion; and when nearly nineteen, and in his last quarter at Harrow, was still as undecided as ever. There had, indeed, been some idea of his going to Oxford, with a view to the somewhat vague course of study known as reading for the Bar; but it had lately been a serious question with his father whether it was worth while to incur the expense of an university education which might result in nothing after all. At this moment, however, another idea presented itself to the paternal mind, which was eagerly caught at as a possible solution to this extremely difficult question.

Although Mr Charles Courtenay's official career could hardly have been described as a brilliant success, he was, nevertheless, far from being disposed to undervalue the services which he had rendered to his country, and was, in fact, convinced that, if only circumstances had been somewhat more favourable, he would have risen to great eminence in the official world. In referring to his diplomatic experience, he always spoke with an air of

studied caution and reserve, calculated to convey the idea that if he chose he could divulge secrets which might even then seriously affect the peace of Europe; and as regards his private secretaryship, it would have been impossible for any unprejudiced listener to doubt that, although excluded by the traditions of red tape from the actual deliberations of the Cabinet, he had nevertheless been in some degree a party to their most important actions. He was, moreover, inclined to attach great importance to "office" of any kind, and had a general idea that a young man of good birth and connections was bound, apart from any vulgar considerations, to be selected for a fair share of whatever "plums" the public service might have to offer. The idea, therefore, of his son's entering some Government office had always rather commended itself to him, though up to the present time it had assumed no very definite shape. But happening, during one of his somewhat rare visits to London, to fall in with his old acquaintance, Mr Gregory Sutton, formerly secretary to the General Enquiry Office, it was suggested to him by that eminent ex-public servant, that, if

he really contemplated anything of the sort for his son, he might do worse than enter him for his own old office. The suggestion was eagerly accepted, and Mr Courtenay at once proceeded to give the question his serious attention. As for Gerard himself, the notion was far from unpleasing. His ideas on the subject of Government offices were certainly somewhat vague, and he was under a general impression that an attendance of a few hours a day, with unlimited leave and ample opportunities for playing cricket, would constitute the main features of an official career. He was, therefore, by no means indisposed to fall in with the paternal views, and was quite prepared to take whatever preliminary steps might be considered necessary. Beyond a moderate proficiency in Latin verses and the slightest possible acquaintance with ancient history, his six years at Harrow had not produced any striking educational results; and although the examination for the General Enquiry Office was by no means of a severe description, not having as yet been included in the open-competition scheme, it was found absolutely necessary that he should undergo a

certain amount of tuition with a "crammer" before attempting to pass the ordeal.

The patronage of the office was, for some occult reason, vested in the President of the Council, who in other respects had absolutely nothing to do with it. It required but little exertion on Mr Courtenay's part to get his son's name placed on this nobleman's list of candidates, with a half-promise that he would be considered at the next vacancy, which might be expected before long. Gerard for once set to work with a will; his instructor reported most favourably of his progress; and when the expected nomination arrived, and the date of the final examination was announced, it was found that two out of the four nominees had failed to pass the modest preliminary tests, and that the third had at the last moment abandoned the idea of the civil service, and was about to go up for the army. So our friend had a "walk over;" and, within six months from the time when the idea was first started, the "Civil Service Gazette" announced that Gerard Courtenay, Esq., had been appointed to a junior clerkship in the General Enquiry Office.

CHAPTER III.

THE GENERAL ENQUIRY OFFICE.

No one who is acquainted with the situation of the General Enquiry Office could possibly deny that it is such as to suggest the idea of intense respectability. While not actually within the sacred precincts of Downing Street, it is nevertheless so nearly adjacent to it that the messengers attached to the great International and other offices that constitute the fountain-head of official existence, will occasionally condescend to carry important missives over the intervening distance, instead of relegating them to the more commonplace means of conveyance afforded by the post-office bag. And, standing back as it does from the noise and turmoil of Whitehall, with an entrance which it has been the cherished aim of successive Administrations to keep secret from the public, it is completely removed from that undesirable contact with the

outside world which must be so difficult to avoid in the case of a public department with its entrance in a public thoroughfare, and which must necessarily tend to detract from the dignity and repose of those offices which are not so fortunately situated. The fact, moreover, of being constructed out of two or three old private houses gives a look of old-world snugness to the General Enquiry Office that is incompatible with the more modern structures over the way, where outward splendour is not always accompanied by internal comfort. The old brick walls are black and dingy; the passages are tortuous and cramped; and what were once well-proportioned rooms are subdivided and partitioned in order to meet the requirements of a staff of secretaries and clerks. But the remains of a still beautiful marble staircase, and here and there a rare piece of carving or an exquisitely painted ceiling, recall memories of the past and afford a pleasant contrast to the commonplace surroundings of a modern public office.

The general features of this great public institution are, in short, as we have already

observed, calculated to convey the idea of intense respectability; and the same remark may be applied with equal correctness to its inmates. They are not, as a rule, equal in social standing to the highly ornamental staff of the International Office; they do not succeed in getting appointed to such lucrative places as the gentlemen of the Treasury, and they are not eligible for the well-paid opportunities for committing gentlemanlike suicide that are open to those employés of the Aboriginal Office who may be prompted by domestic or other disappointments to take service on the West Coast of Africa. They are not seen much in fashionable society, and may be looked for in vain at Hurlingham in June, at Cowes in August, or in select country-houses in autumn. But they manage to enjoy life very much in their own way, and though their domestic surroundings may savour more of Bayswater and the suburbs than Mayfair and Belgravia, they are perhaps none the less happy on that account. They take a pride in their work, and the General Enquiry Office enjoys a just reputation for efficiency. For the work in question, though of

a somewhat peculiar nature, is of a character that demands a high standard of intelligence, and the General Enquirers may be called upon at any moment to participate indirectly in some of the most important questions of the day. And here it may not be out of place to say a word respecting the origin and history of the office.

Many generations of statesmen will come and go before the name of that good and gifted public servant, Sir Hercules Pigeonhole, now gone to his rest, will cease to be a household word in the traditions of the International Office, over whose destinies he held a despotic but kindly sway for a period altogether unsurpassed in point of duration in the annals of official life. Many an ambassador and diplomatist still living will be able to recall the time when, as smooth-faced attachés, they were summoned for their first interview with the great permanent secretary, the absolute arbiter of their destinies, and how, although by no means, as a rule, inclined to think much worse of themselves than of other people, they trembled and shrank into nothing as they found themselves

for the first time in the great man's presence. And many an old International Office man will remember, not without a tinge of regret, those golden days of his youth, when the paternal jurisdiction of Sir Hercules enveloped him as with a mantle, and he knew that, if he only did his duty and acted strictly according to orders, he was certain to be looked after and brought to the front in his turn. For never was there a more loyal chief than Sir Hercules; and though some of his would-be detractors might complain that his devotion to the interests of his office was such as to render him sometimes a little blind to the general interests of the British taxpayer, it could never be said of him that he neglected those over whom he ruled, and for whose welfare he considered himself in a great measure responsible.

It was about the zenith, then, of Sir Hercules' reign, and at a period when international affairs were attracting a more than usual amount of public attention, that a question of great importance happened to arise, which, apart from the weighty interests involved in its more immediate surroundings,

necessitated a minute and tedious investigation of the records of the office for about twenty or thirty years back. The entire resources of the establishment were, in fact, strained to the utmost, as every available functionary was detached for this special service, and the ordinary work of the various departments was for the time being completely thrown out of gear. This, of course, involved a certain amount of delay in other matters of less urgency; and some question of minor importance having been left undisposed of for rather more than the usual period allowed by the unwritten law of the office, the then Secretary of State, whose attention had been called to the case by an outside friend, ventured to suggest to the permanent secretary that the matter might have been looked to a little earlier. This, however, was more than Sir Hercules could stand; for although no one was more capable of administering a rebuke when called for, the prerogative of so doing was one that he specially reserved to himself; and to have a mere transitory Secretary of State poking his nose into questions of official economy, of which it was impossible that he

could be expected to know anything whatever, was a reflection upon Sir Hercules and his young men that could not be tolerated for a moment. It was in a minute, therefore, of withering sarcasm that he condescended to explain to his temporary chief, that although the staff of his department was, thanks to his own admirable organisation, quite unequalled in the discharge of its duties, emergencies might occur with which even their energy and resources might be unable to cope; and he, in short, hinted pretty plainly to the Secretary of State that he would have done better to let the matter alone. It is hardly necessary to add that the amiable and easy-going nobleman who at the time occupied this position was only too ready to acknowledge his error, and to make a handsome apology, in which he placed on record his deliberate opinion that the staff of the office was as near perfection as human nature could hope to arrive. The insult, however, continued to rankle in Sir Hercules' bosom, and to exercise his mind in a manner that might have surprised those who were unaware of the jealous solicitude with which he watched over every detail of his

beloved office. But the incident turned out to be productive of important results. One day when, in the intervals of work, Sir Hercules was still brooding over what had occurred, a bright idea occurred to him. Why should he not place the recurrence of such a misunderstanding beyond all possibility? Why should his boys, as he used to call them, be subjected to the chance of being taken away from their vitally important work of copying his minutes and dispatches to rout about among mouldy old records? Why not establish a repository for such documents, with a special staff of officials to take charge of and look into them? Promotion was apt to be slack in the office, and there was at the moment a highly deserving official of the second class for whom it would be convenient to provide. The idea was a truly grand one, and Sir Hercules could not refrain from complimenting himself on his ingenuity. It wanted but a few days' reflection to bring the rough idea into shape, and to embody his views in a masterly memorandum addressed to the Secretary of State, who, on his part, was only too glad of an opportunity of

making an *amende honorable*, and in some manner compensating Sir Hercules for the annoyance which he felt he must have caused him by his own ill-timed officiousness. It was not long, therefore, before an official letter was addressed from the International Office to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, stating that in consequence of the great increase in the work, and the calls that were being made on the time of every available member of the department, it was found impossible any longer to keep up that constant care and supervision of the official records that was of such vital importance both to the office and to the public. It was suggested, therefore, for their Lordships' consideration, that the time had arrived when the custody of certain records of the International Office might properly be handed over to a sort of sub-department, whose sole duty should be to arrange and keep in order such of the documents as were not required in the International Office for current work, but which might at any moment be required for reference. The members of the new sub-department were also to discharge the functions of *précis*-writers, so

that, in the event of a question arising which required reference to the previous correspondence, the whole case could be got at and resuscitated in a very short time, instead of involving, as at present, a laborious search and the detaching of the regular staff of officials from their more immediate work. Other points, with which it is unnecessary to trouble the reader, were entered into in detail, and nothing, in short, was omitted to make the scheme perfect. With the official letter to "My Lords" was sent a private note to the Prime Minister from the Secretary of State, urging upon him the importance of the scheme, and adding, by way of rendering its adoption beyond doubt, "Pigeonhole insists upon it." It may be a question whether this last consideration did not carry even more weight with the Premier than the actual merits, great as they undoubtedly were, of the scheme put before him. Be this as it may, no great difficulties were raised. In those days the House of Commons had not learned to make itself disagreeable in the way of asking inconvenient questions or challenging votes that it did not understand; and a

quiet little item was accordingly placed on the next year's estimates for what was at first entitled the Record Department of the International Office. A few words in explanation of the vote were graciously accorded to the House by the Secretary to the Treasury and the Under-Secretary for International Affairs; and though among the murmurs of applause which greeted the announcement there might have been detected a few sounds that could hardly have been taken for expressions of unqualified approval, it was felt that any objection to such an admirable scheme could only arise from ignorance or prejudice, and that those who were unable to recognise and appreciate the obvious advantages that must thereby accrue to the public interest were more to be pitied than blamed.

The new department, or sub-department, was at first established in an empty Government house in New Street, Spring Gardens, and consisted of the functionary from the International Office previously referred to, who was dignified with the name of Controller of Records, and assigned a salary equivalent to that of a principal clerk. There were also some

half-dozen subordinates, two or three of whom had been attached to the librarian's department of the International Office, and the remainder were young gentlemen who had passed examinations for various offices in which there were no immediate vacancies, and who were only too glad to be employed anywhere in a temporary capacity.

Sir Hercules' little scheme was, therefore, a complete success. So manifest, indeed, were the advantages offered by the new arrangements, that it was not long before it occurred to the authorities of other offices that participation in them would be of great benefit to themselves. First, it was found that there were many questions of constant recurrence at the Aboriginal Office that were so mixed up with international matters, that it would be a great convenience to have the whole correspondence tabulated and arranged in one series, and under the charge of the same official. So a couple more clerks were drafted from the Aboriginal Office, one of whom was to be chief clerk to the new department, and a few hundredweight more of papers were transferred from Whitehall to New Street. Then

it occurred to some brilliant genius at the Admiralty that it would be a great thing if the staff of that department could be relieved from the Slave Trade and Maltese Orange correspondence, which was increasing in volume and importance every year; and shortly afterwards the permanent secretary of the Board of Trade found it necessary to inform his chief, that unless some arrangements could be made for transferring the work connected with the inspection of railway refreshment-rooms to some other department, he feared it might be necessary to revise the whole staff of the office. So by degrees the new department grew and expanded, till, after many changes in name and many additions to and reorganisations of its staff, it finally emerged into the full-blown dignity of a distinct Government office, with a vice-president and permanent secretary, and has for some time, as every one is aware, been well known as the General Enquiry Office, the duties of which may be roughly described as the custody of certain branches of correspondence from the public offices generally, which, although essentially connected with past events, have not yet reached such a stage

of antiquity as to be unlikely to be brought up again. This stage, however, is, in one case or another, being constantly arrived at; for once a year a select court of inquiry is held upon every department of the office, and such questions as have been in its custody for a certain number of years, or have been found to be practically obsolete, are relegated to the musty archives of the State Paper Office, where they are interred with every mark of respect, and are succeeded by a new series.

It will readily be understood from the foregoing remarks that the work of the General Enquiry Office is of no ordinary character. It is, in fact, a sort of *multum in parvo*, an essence, as it were, of the various offices affiliated to it. Thus at one moment the General Enquirers may be called upon to look up and furnish a history of the circumstances that led to the rupture of diplomatic relations with the Honolulu Islanders twenty years ago; at another, to refer to the correspondence between a former First Lord of the Admiralty and the Admiral of the Mediterranean squadron as to the number of clean shirts that a navigating sub-lieutenant should be expected to take to

sea with him; while, in the midst of their researches into these important questions, may come an urgent appeal from the Aboriginal Office to be informed, as a matter of precedent, how many wives were allowed to the ex-king of the Lumbagees while in honourable captivity at the Tum-Tum Islands in the year 1838.

Such, then, was the office where Gerard Courtenay was destined to commence his career, and where one April morning, about a week after the notification to him of his appointment, he presented himself, with that indescribable mixture of uncertainty, curiosity, and hope that so many have experienced on taking the first plunge into the stormy waters of life. On the whole, his sensations were far from being unpleasant; for it was something to think that he had already made a start, and was in the proud position of a salaried Government official, while many of his contemporaries were either working with army crammers, beginning to read for the law, or still in a state of comparative pupilage at Oxford or Cambridge. Whatever favourable views he had been disposed to take of his

prospects were encouraged to the utmost by his father, who, as has been already indicated, had quite succeeded in persuading himself that his own official career had been a most momentous and successful one, and was convinced that any son of his must start with an enormous advantage in having the prestige of his father's reputation. It was, moreover, a great thing to get his second son off his hands so early in life in this very inexpensive manner. Although Mr Courtenay was really fond of his children, and would have grudged them nothing that he thought absolutely necessary for their welfare, he was equally fond of his own personal comforts, and had contemplated, not without some feelings of dismay, the prospect of having to "fork out" some £300 a year for a university education for a son who had evinced no special inclination for any of the ordinary vocations of life.

Having succeeded, by the help of a friendly policeman, a commissionaire, and a stout lady who sold oranges, in arriving at the sequestered portals of his future official abode, Gerard found himself, on pushing open a swing-door, in a hall occupied by a couple

of portly, well-to-do, gentlemen-out-of-livery looking functionaries, one of whom was sitting in an old-fashioned porter's chair reading a newspaper, and the other balancing himself on his heels in front of a large fireless grate, and apparently absorbed in his own reflections. He had been told to inquire for Mr Mills, the permanent secretary, and accordingly imparted his wishes, not without a certain amount of deference, to the stoutest of the two gentlemen before him.

"Mr Mills! Oh, yes, sir. Mr Mills is engaged just now. Will you walk this way, sir?" piloting Gerard as he spoke along a passage to a gloomy little apartment which had the unmistakable appearance of a waiting-room. "What name shall I give to Mr Mills, sir? Mr Courtenay! Oh, yes. Certainly, sir, Our new young gentleman, I think, sir? Mr Mills is sure to be disengaged soon, and I will let him know you are waiting. Paper, sir, if you have not seen it." And having thus done his best to put Gerard at his ease, the well-trained ex-butler left him to himself, and proceeded to impart to his friend in the hall his opinion of the latest addition to the office.

Gerard had hardly time to glance in an uninterested manner at the newspaper, and take in the general appearance of the room, which was not calculated to inspire any special sense of hilarity, before the opening of an adjacent door and the sound of feet along the passage suggested to him that his turn might be approaching; and in another moment his stout friend reappeared and conducted him back through the hall to a door in the farther side, through which he followed his name into a large library-like room, and found himself in the presence of the permanent secretary.

Mr Mills was a smart, fussy little man, with a large head, grizzly hair inclined to baldness, and keen twinkling little eyes, the natural effulgence of which was increased by the addition of large horn spectacles, with which he beamed upon his visitor after the manner of a lively little owl. He had been educated in the school of the lamented Sir Hercules, having been in his youth attached in some capacity to the International Office, and had very wisely set this great man before himself as a model to be carefully studied and followed

in every relation of official life. Whether or not he had succeeded in embodying in himself a reproduction of his illustrious prototype was, perhaps, a matter of opinion. But he was undoubtedly a clever, pushing little man, who, by a great deal of talk, a certain amount of family interest, and a good deal of real hard work, had succeeded in raising himself step by step to the by no means unimportant position he at present held, the duties of which he had now discharged for some years. He had established a reputation for great smartness in the administration of his office, and always contrived, whether really busy or not, to present the appearance of being up to his eyes in work. When Gerard entered, he was engaged in signing his name at an upright desk to a basket-full of papers which lay by his side, while other documents of every description covered a large table in the middle of the room, and were scattered about on smaller tables, chairs, and every conceiveable spot that offered a convenient resting-place.

"Ah! Courtenay," he exclaimed, taking off his spectacles and coming forward with his

pen in his hand. "How are you? Glad to see you. Sit down—that is to say, if you can find a place. We are very busy just now, tremendously pressed, in fact, and shall be very glad of your services. Let's see! You are Harrow, aren't you? Old Harrow man myself, though I am afraid to think how long ago now. Well, we will soon set you to work. You are to be in the Aboriginal Department, under Mr Chapman—very interesting work, and plenty of it. By Jove! those fellows at the Aboriginal Office give us no peace now!" And so he rattled on, in an abrupt but not unkindly fashion.

Gerard of course expressed his readiness to enter upon his new duties whenever required; and at the end of a little more conversation, which, after the first, displayed an increasing tendency to become desultory, it was arranged that he should return the next day and be formally initiated into his work.

"By the way, though," added Mr Mills as Gerard was about to take his leave, "you must make acquaintance with your chief," and he rang the bell. "Collins," as Gerard's friend of the hall entered, "take Mr Courtenay up to

Mr. Chapman's room. Good-bye, Courtenay, good-bye. Hope to see more of you soon." And before the door had closed on Gerard, the horn spectacles were once more on the great man's nose, and he was deep in his papers again.

Following the portly Mr Collins, Gerard was marshalled up a spacious marble staircase, where one or two handsomely carved doors indicated what had once been reception-rooms. Passing by one of these, which Mr Collins indicated by a jerk of his thumb and a reverential whisper as the abode of the vice-president, a swing-door admitted Gerard and his guide to another passage, and to what had evidently once been the backstairs. Arrived at the top, Gerard at once found himself in a different atmosphere, as it were, and it was easy to see that he had reached the real working part of the establishment. Instead of the quiet and gentleman-like repose that appeared to reign downstairs, all up here was bustle and noise. Long uncarpeted passages, obstructed here and there by queer-looking glass boxes, or gaunt book-shelves filled with the most uninviting-looking literature, led to

dark doorways unrelieved by carving or other embellishments, or ended in more narrow staircases of a decidedly forbidding aspect. Careworn officials went in and out of green baize doors, and messengers of small stature hurried about everywhere with papers. Gerard could not, indeed, help being struck by the remarkable contrast which the appearance of these functionaries upstairs offered to that of the plump gentlemen down below, and wondered whether, if advanced to the same position of dignity, there would be any chance of their ever attaining the same proportions, or whether they were a distinct genus, destined to run about for ever at the bidding of irresponsible clerks, and shut out from the dignity of attendance on the vice-president or the permanent secretary.

Before, however, he had time to turn this question thoroughly over in his mind, his conductor stopped at a door of rather less shabby appearance than those around, and intimated that they had reached Mr Chapman's room. Once more Gerard's name was announced, and he found himself in a fairly comfortable room, with a pleasant look-out

over the river, and a chimney-piece which, although utterly disfigured by a coating of white paint, was evidently a really fine piece of carving.

It was a mild April day, but notwithstanding this a fire was burning in the grate, and Mr Chapman was sitting almost into it. Like the permanent secretary, he also was a little man, but with a bushy head of dark hair, and a complexion so dark as to be almost copper-coloured. He had been all his life in the office, and although much younger-looking, was senior both in age and service to Mr Mills. It was therefore an unpardonable grievance with him that Mr Mills should have been put over his head, and that he should be still only chief clerk while one who had been once his junior was now permanent secretary, and entitled to all the privileges, both official and otherwise, attendant on such an exalted position. He consequently lost no opportunity of asserting whatever rights he considered he possessed, and of showing his real superiority to Mr Mills by differing from him on every possible occasion. Mr Mills, it must be confessed, took the chief clerk's ill-

humour very well; and being by no means ill-natured, and perhaps feeling that "poor old Chapman's" irritation at having been passed over was not altogether unreasonable, he never pressed a point unless absolutely necessary, and consequently enabled the chief clerk to enjoy not unfrequently the satisfaction of triumphantly demonstrating, to his friends and the office in general, how he had got the better of the permanent secretary. On the occasion of Gerard's arrival he happened to be in an unusually good temper, having just gained his point in a long paper argument about a fossil case which had been referred from the Aboriginal Office respecting certain rights of sovereignty over an uninhabited and uninhabitable island off the West Coast of Africa. He was therefore quite disposed to be gracious to his new subaltern, and received him in a friendly though perhaps not a very encouraging manner. He asked Gerard about his examination, spoke of the office and the many changes he himself had seen in it, and lamented that the young men of the present day did not appear to take the same interest in their work as in his own

early days. He inquired whether Gerard had seen Mr Mills, and could not resist a slight sneer at his expense.

"I suppose you found Mr Mills very busy?" he inquired. "Mr Mills gets through a great deal of work, or thinks he does," he added, in a sneering tone and with a bitter little laugh.

Gerard was not quite sure whether he ought to laugh also, though it seemed to him that jesting on such topics was rather above him; but seeing a cloud gather on his future chief's face, he ventured on a spasmodic smile, and felt particularly uncomfortable. He was very glad, therefore, when the interview came to an end, and he parted with Mr. Chapman on very fair terms, and with an understanding that he was to present himself at eleven o'clock on the following day. And having thus launched our hero on the official world, we will now leave him alone for the present.

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

CHAPTER IV.

FROM NEWMARKET TO WHITEHALL.

We must ask our readers to imagine a period of five years to have elapsed since the events recorded in the last chapter, and to transport themselves in imagination to the interior of a first-class carriage on the Great Eastern Railway between Newmarket and London. The second spring meeting at that time-honoured resort of all true lovers of the turf was just over, and a comparatively select company of racing men were dispersing, to meet again before long on the less exclusive slopes of Epsom. The train was crowded with sporting men, and the particular carriage referred to was as full as it could hold.

"Well, Tommy," exclaimed a full-blown, jovial-looking party, in a rather loud racing costume, when, after the incidents of the day's racing had been thoroughly discussed, a lull in the flow of conversation had set in, "this

is a go, and no mistake! Fancy you being a Minister! Lord, I should as soon have thought of their making one out of old Ephraim the trainer! General Enquiry Office though. That sounds like business. Ought to be able to give us no end of tips, eh?"

"By Jove, yes," chimed in another "noble sportsman." "I say, Tommy, old chap, you'll be wanting a private secretary. Don't you think I would do nicely now? Won't swear to my spelling, but otherwise I could get over the ground a bit if I got hold of a good pen. Besides, it would be a devilish good thing for you to have a respectable-looking chap like me to interview all the coves."

"Ha, ha!" laughed a third; "only fancy the old Cadger a private secretary! Why, the very look of him would ruin the whole concern. They would think they had got into a betting office by mistake, and go away. By Jove, though, that wouldn't be a bad idea. Save you a lot of trouble, Tommy, old boy, eh?"

"It's all very well," growled a quiet and somewhat grumpy-looking old gentleman in a corner, who had taken but little part in the

general conversation, "but you'll see if Tommy won't make as good a Minister as any of them. He's quite the statesman, he is, and has got a precious sight more in him than any of you fellows. I'll take short odds about his being in the Cabinet some of these days, if he sticks to it and don't make a fool of himself;" and having thus delivered himself, the speaker relapsed into a study of his newspaper.

The individual addressed as Tommy was a handsome, well-bred-looking man of about two-and-forty, who was perhaps better known to the outside world as Viscount Ravendale, eldest son of the veteran Earl of Allonby, M.P. for Oldminster, and proprietor of a small but highly successful racing stable, which, although not as yet including a Derby winner, had carried off many of the lesser prizes of the turf, and was considered as likely to produce a favourite for the great national event as any establishment in the country. He had been in Parliament for some years, having entered when very young; and having shown considerable ability, and some disposition to turn his attention to politics, had already been talked of for a subordinate

appointment in a previous Administration. But, during a long spell of Opposition, he had rather abandoned the arena of parliamentary life for the more congenial pursuits of field-sports in general and racing in particular; and although a regular attendant at divisions, and always to be relied upon in a party emergency, there were few who would not have been far more disposed to associate him with Newmarket than Downing Street. But he had not been lost sight of by a particularly observant Premier; and during the two or three years that had elapsed since the return of his party to power, there had not been wanting indications that the eye of his chief was upon him. Although, therefore, a matter of considerable astonishment and some amusement to a large proportion of the outside world, there were a few knowing ones who were by no means surprised when it was announced that, owing to the resignation of Lord Maldon and the transfer of Sir Antony Flint to the Home Office, the vacant position of Vice-President of the General Enquiry Office had been offered to and accepted by Lord Ravendale. The letter from the Prime Minister

containing the offer of the appointment had reached him a day or two previously—in fact, just as he was about to start for Newmarket. It was perhaps less of a surprise to himself than to others, and it did not take him long to make up his mind and to write a short note of acceptance. At the same time, he was unable to see any reason why the fact of his having thus committed himself should debar him from another day or two of freedom and indulgence in his favourite pursuit; so he went off to Newmarket without saying anything about it, leaving his friends to find out what had happened through the medium of the newspapers or by any other means they liked.

The new Vice-President took the chaff of his friends very good-naturedly, but at the same time let it be seen that he was in no way ashamed of his new position, and quite prepared to accept its responsibilities. "Well, Cadger, my boy," he said, in a tone of mock seriousness, addressing himself to the gentleman who had been designated by that name, an Irish peer of old family and of hereditary sporting tastes, "I'll see what I can do for

you. I'll certainly make a note of your application, old fellow; but of course you'll understand that there may be other chaps wanting the same thing, so I can't well make any promise as yet. But I won't forget you, though. Of course, with some people your looks might be against you, you know; but I know you're a decent fellow, and I'll just see what I can do."

This retort had the effect of turning the laugh against the "Cadger," who had no other repartee ready at the moment beyond a playful dig in the ribs with his umbrella. The conversation then took another turn, till the evening gradually came on, and the Cadger, who had lunched copiously before starting, began to snore heavily. The others composed themselves either to sleep or reflection in their respective corners, and silence reigned in the compartment, until a gradual slackening, the twinkling of many lights, and a tiresome succession of tunnels, announced that they were nearing St. Pancras.

"Hollo!" exclaimed Sir Henry Wilmot, the quiet gentleman who had expressed such a favourable opinion of his friend Tommy,

waking up and rubbing his eyes. "Here we are. Which way are we all going? I can give anybody a lift in my brougham who's going Berkeley Square way."

"All right, old fellow," exclaimed Lord Ravendale, "you run me down to the corner of Brook Street, and I'll tell my servant to come on with my things." So the "Cadger" having by much shaking and punching been woke up, and with some difficulty got to understand that they had arrived in London, the party speedily dispersed, and Lord Ravendale and Sir Henry Wilmot drove off together.

"Well, my dear fellow," began Sir Henry, in a tone of real affection, as soon as they had got away from the noise of the station, "I am uncommonly pleased about this business of yours. You know, fond as I am of racing and all that, it is not quite the thing for a fellow in your position to be doing nothing else; and this is just the very thing for you. I am sure I wish you success with all my heart."

"Thanks very much, my dear Sir Henry," replied Lord Ravendale. "I was sure you would think I had done the right thing in

accepting, and you understand these things as well as most people. Between ourselves, you know, I don't much mind the idea. Of course it will be a bit of a tie, and nothing would have induced me to ask for anything of the kind. But as it came in the way, it seemed to me that one could not do oneself much harm over it; and then, too, I know my dear old father will be as pleased as Punch about it. Of course it will be rather a change for me to go in for office work and all that sort of thing."

"Well," replied Sir Henry, "as far as that goes, I don't expect you'll find your health suffer much from overwork; for, without any disparagement to the importance of your office, I don't suppose the Vice-President need do a stroke of work more than he likes. I take it Mills does the whole business, or will if you allow him to. I know when I was under-secretary at the Home Office, and poor old Cathcart was in your place, he never did a single thing beyond signing his name every now and then. But that is fifteen years ago, and of course things may be changed since then. Anyhow, I expect you'll find Mills a first-rate man to deal with."

"Oh, I daresay," replied Lord Ravendale. "You know I am a queer sort of fellow in that way. Of course I don't pretend to be a glutton for work, or anything of that sort, but I do like to know what I am about; and if there is one thing I hate more than another, it is not knowing where you are. So if these fellows try their hands at keeping me in the dark, I shouldn't wonder if there were a bit of a row. But from what you say, I expect this fellow Mills is the sort of chap one could pretty well trust to, and I daresay it will be all right."

"Oh, you'll get on right enough, never fear," rejoined Sir Henry. "But here we are in Brook Street. Well, good-night, and good-luck to you. See you at the Carlton in a day or two, and hear all about the office."

So Sir Henry drove off, while Lord Ravendale started at a brisk pace to walk up Brook Street to the family mansion in Grosvenor Square, where a room or two were always kept for his accommodation.

Arrived at the paternal abode, his lordship found that even an absence of three nights had been sufficient to accumulate a tolerable

pile of letters, some of which were of unmistakably official type, and bore the stamp of the General Enquiry Office. Putting these aside for the present, he selected half a dozen of those that appeared most interesting, and walked into the library, opening them as he went. The second epistle arrived at, which he tore open with the utmost indifference to the pretty monogram, surmounted by an earl's coronet, which adorned the envelope, was worded as follows :—

"18 Park Lane, *Friday*.

"Dear Lord Ravendale,—You will probably by this time be quite tired of receiving congratulations on your new appointment, but I must just write a line to say how pleased I was to hear of it. I am sure you will make an excellent vice-president, and I wish you every possible success. And now I hope you will not think me a dreadful bore, as I have a little favour to ask you. My cousin, Gerard Courtenay, is in the General Enquiry Office, and is very anxious to obtain the post of your private secretary. Of course you will have plenty of other applications, and I should

not like to press you in the matter; but if you should be able to do anything for him, I should be so much obliged. He is a nice, gentleman-like fellow, and, I should think, would make a good secretary; but of course I cannot pretend to know anything about that. He is rather quiet and shy, and I fancy does not know very many people, so you have probably never heard of him. His own people, too, have lived out of the world for so many years that they must be almost forgotten. But his mother is my aunt Theodosia, my father's sister, so you see he is my first-cousin. Please do not think me a great bore, and believe me yours very sincerely,

"ALICE MOUNT-EASTON.

"*P.S.*—We are so glad to have such good accounts of your father. How pleased he will be!"

"Hang the women!" was Lord Ravendale's first exclamation, as he threw the note on one side and proceeded to open the next; "they are always at one about something or other. I suppose I shall have a heap of fellows

bothering me for the same thing. What a nuisance it all is!"

His lordship was not far wrong, for by the time he had skimmed through his correspondence, he found three similar applications: one from a would-be racing man, who had just succeeded in coming to hopeless grief on the turf; another from a neighbour of his father, on behalf of a ne'er-do-well son; and a third, in a sort of copperplate writing, from a gentleman he had never heard of before, and who based his claims to consideration on the grounds of his family having supported the Conservative cause for many generations, and his own skill in penmanship and the keeping of accounts, which he evidently considered to be the principal qualifications required for the post of an official private secretary.

"Well," reflected the new Vice-President, as he went to his room to dress for dinner, "I suppose I shall have to get a private secretary somehow or other, and I dare say this cousin of Lady Mount-Easton wouldn't be much more useless than the rest. But I'll be hanged if I bind myself to take any one of them." So he propped up Lady Mount-

Easton's note on the dressing-table while he completed his toilet; and being a man of action in answering letters, he proceeded to indite the following reply before leaving the house :—

"16 Grosvenor Square, *April* 21, 18—.

"Dear Lady Mount-Easton,—Many thanks for your note and kind congratulations. This Government-office business is certainly a new experiment, but I hope it will all be for the best; and in these days we must all put our shoulders to the wheel for the good cause.

"As regards your cousin, I will be sure to bear your wishes in mind, though of course you will understand that it is impossible for me to make any sort of promise, as I have not been near the office yet, and do not even know what I may have to dispose of in the way of a private secretaryship, or what the regulations of the office may be on the subject. In great haste.—Yours sincerely,

"Ravendale."

"There, that will do for her," observed Lord Ravendale to himself, "and the others

can wait till to-morrow." So, giving the note to his servant to be left in Park Lane that night, he got into a hansom that was waiting for him, and rattled off to dinner at the Carlton. And having introduced Lady Mount-Easton into our story, we should be wanting in courtesy if we were to proceed farther without introducing her formally to the reader.

CHAPTER V.

COUSINS.

The Countess of Mount-Easton was the only daughter of the late Earl of Warlingham, brother to Lady Theodosia Courtenay, and consequently, as she had pointed out to Lord Ravendale, Gerard Courtenay's first-cousin. She was the eldest of her family, which consisted of two brothers, the present Lord Warlingham and the Hon. John Dutton, captain and lieut.-colonel in the Grenadier Guards. Her mother having died when Lady Alice was but ten years of age, and the two others respectively five and three, she had, while still quite a child, succeeded in a measure to the charge of her little brothers, which she had undertaken with that devotion which is so often seen in similar circumstances. It is not improbable that the cares and duties of an elder sister, which she had so willingly and earnestly assumed, had had some effect in

forming a character which was in itself something very much out of the common. But be this as it may, it would have been difficult to find a girl with a sweeter and more unselfish disposition, or more universally loved by all with whom she came in contact, than Lady Alice Dutton. Add to this a tall, graceful figure, a beautifully-shaped and well-set-on head, and a face that, though perhaps not absolutely perfect in point of features, possessed that winning loveliness of expression which is apt to be so much more overpowering than the most perfect combination of colouring and outline, and it is not surprising that, when she came out in London under the auspices of her father, she attracted a very considerable amount of attention. Before the end of her first season she had had three offers of marriage, any one of which would have been most suitable from a worldly point of view; and by the time she had been out two years, she had half the eldest sons and a good many of the actual representatives of the aristocracy at her feet. But for some reason or other she turned a deaf ear to all. Though endowed with a keen sense of enjoy-

ment and a disposition to make the most of everything that came in her way, she seemed just as happy in her somewhat hum-drum occupation of presiding over her father's house in the country and looking after her brothers, as in the whirl and excitement of London life. So by degrees it came to be said that Lady Alice was not going to marry; and though wherever she showed herself she continued to make havoc in the hearts of the gilded youth of Great Britain, her perfect indifference to admiration and her apparent preference of her own family circle to any other attractions that might be offered her, were apt to be productive of despair rather than interest. It was a matter, therefore, of no little astonishment when, after she had been five years before the public, a marriage was one day announced, which was not contradicted, between the Earl of Mount-Easton and Lady Alice Dutton.

Upon the considerations which had induced Lady Alice to yield at last it is not necessary for us to enter. But those who knew her best had always said that when she did marry she would make a wise choice; and there seemed every probability of this prediction

being justified by the event. In point of wealth and position there was nothing left to be desired. Lord Mount-Easton was the eldest son of the Marquis of St. Ives, the representative of a long line of north-country chieftains, who having, like most Border families of distinction, originally come to the front by the exhibition of exceptional qualifications in the cattle-lifting and moss-trooping line, had by degrees settled down into peaceful stock-farmers, and in the course of years had developed into titled supporters of Church and State. Nor was there any disparity in point of years, for Lord Mount-Easton was only about six years older than his bride, and was as active and energetic in his habits as became the hope of his race. He had been in the Life Guards till within about a year of his marriage, and shortly after that event had been returned to Parliament for a northern borough. But after representing his constituents with great fidelity for twelve years, he had been defeated at a general election by a radical weaver, and had since that time devoted himself principally to country pursuits and the supervision of his father's property.

For the Marquis was now an old man, and though possessed of a vigorous constitution, which still enabled him to hunt two days a week with his justly-celebrated pack of hounds, he found that the personal attention he had been in the habit of giving to every detail of the management of his large estates was beginning to be a great tax on his strength; and it was a great comfort to him, therefore, to be able to hand over the reins of government to a son who showed every promise of being a worthy successor to his father.

At the time of our story the Mount-Eastons had been married nearly seventeen years. But those who had known Lady Alice as a girl, and who had watched her life with the loving jealousy that is only too quick to see the slightest indication of anything unsatisfactory, were forced to admit that, if external appearances went for anything, Lord Mount-Easton must have proved a good husband. For although the soft girlish contour of face had given place to more marked outlines, and the elastic springiness of early youth had been succeeded by a more dignified and matronly bearing, there still remained the same grace-

ful figure, scarcely altered by the vicissitudes of married life, the same beautifully-shaped and queen-like head, and the same sweet expression that was a true index of the mind within; and at thirty-nine, and with a son in the Eton eleven, the Countess of Mount-Easton was justly considered by a pretty numerous circle of admirers to be still a very lovely and quite the most charming woman in England.

It is not surprising that among the number of these admirers should have been included our friend Gerard, who, although of course some years her junior, was possessed of the most sincere and honest devotion to his cousin; and although their paths in life lay as a rule widely apart, there had for some time existed a strong friendship between them, which their only occasional meetings had rendered none the less cordial.

Lady Mount-Easton had naturally taken some interest in Gerard's life at the General Enquiry Office; and when a change was announced in the vice-presidency of this important branch of the British constitution, it was to her that he had confided his hopes

and wishes as to obtaining the much-coveted prize of a private secretaryship. It appeared to him, indeed, as if everything depended upon his success. For we are sorry to be obliged to confess that during the five years which he had now passed in the Government service, our hero's views of life had very much altered, and the bright hopes and aspirations with which he had joyously entered upon his new career had given place to feelings of disappointment and almost despair. As has been already stated, he was of an easy-going and confiding nature, with a disposition too much inclined to trust to what might turn up. Without ever taking the trouble to inquire very closely into what he was about to do, he had conceived a general idea that life in a Government office would be a sort of dignified continuation of Harrow, with pleasant companions, plenty of holidays, and a moderate amount of work, and that after a year or two he would be pretty certain to receive something in the nature of a staff appointment, which would open the way to a career that would eventually land him in the ranks of statesmen, and, for all he knew, might end in

his becoming a Cabinet Minister. In this pleasing delusion he was to a great extent encouraged by his father, who, in his happy self-complacency, had been as satisfied with his own somewhat limited official career as he was convinced that its prestige must encompass and secure the success of his son. To do him justice, he was thoroughly honest in his delusion, and firmly believed that, in accepting the first chance of a Government appointment that came in his way, he was launching his son into life in the most satisfactory manner possible.

For the first year or so, indeed, all seemed pleasant enough. The official hours were by no means severe, the work was interesting in its way, and Gerard could not complain of any want of reasonable indulgence on the part of his superiors. But when the first novelty had worn off, an uncomfortable suspicion began to dawn upon him that the Civil Service might not be altogether the brilliant and dignified profession that he had at first imagined. Not that he actually disliked the work, or found it particularly irksome, for he had sufficient good sense to see that as far as this went he had not

much to complain of; but somehow or other, he began to fear that the service in which he had been placed was not only by no means certain to lead to the distinctions which had been held before his eyes, but that, in the meantime, it was not a profession with which he could desire to identify himself, or in which he could ever feel any real pride and interest. At first he had been quite disposed to make the most of it, and had, in fact, indulged in a little pardonable "swagger" in virtue of his official position. But he soon found out that the position of a Government clerk was not considered by his friends as anything at all exceptional, and he was often rather disturbed by questions as to his future prospects, which suggested ideas that were by no means reassuring. He found, moreover, considerable difficulty in keeping up any connection with those school friends who had started in life at the same moment as himself. During the first summer he managed to get a day's cricket now and then, which enabled him to meet one or two of his old associates. But even here he was at a disadvantage, or seemed to be; for the ties of his office prevented him from

making any positive engagements, and he thus gradually dropped out of this very pleasant form of social intercourse. During the autumn and winter he was able to obtain a fair amount of leave, and to pay some visits at the country houses of his relatives. But here, again, he was pursued by embarrassing questions respecting his office, and as to his reasons for preferring it to other professions; and the impression began to intrude itself upon him, painful to any one, but indescribably so to a very young man, that he was rather "out of it." What wonder, then, that he should at first grow restless and impatient, then despairing, and at last settle down into a sort of hopeless indifference, which augured ill for his future success? His first idea was to throw up his appointment and go into the army; but he knew the objections to this that would be raised at home, and he felt, moreover, a certain reluctance to admit that he had so entirely mistaken his vocation. Then he would take a brighter view of his prospects, and for a time work on contentedly, and try to believe that he was really on the road to official eminence; and then again some

chance question or incident would cause him to relapse into despondency.

This state of mind was about as unsatisfactory for a young man entering life as could well be imagined, and might doubtless in many cases have led either to hopeless apathy or to reckless plunging into dissipation, if only as an escape from self. Both these forms of temptation, especially the latter, were present to Gerard Courtenay. Without, however, being in any way a model character, he had, happily, too much self-respect to become utterly desperate, and was thus preserved from temptations to which many others might have at once succumbed. But what was perhaps most effectual in keeping him straight in his troubles was a strongly-developed taste for active sports. He had been a fair cricketer at Harrow, and pretty near the eleven. He had shown indications of being a good shot, and though he was by no means a first-class horseman, his keenness for the chase was not diminished by his shortcomings in this respect; and whenever treated, as was not unfrequently the case, to a mount with his relative Lord Weatherby's hounds, he gene-

rally managed to scramble about with a fair amount of satisfaction to himself, if not to the unqualified admiration of the field. He entered keenly, moreover, into such athletic or out-door pursuits as were compatible with the occupations of a Government clerk in London; played vigorously at football in winter as well as at cricket in summer; and, in short, indulged in every kind of active exercise that came in his way. So one way or another, five years had slipped over Gerard's head with startling rapidity; and though far from being satisfied with his lot, he had become to a great extent accustomed to it, and was forced to admit that there were extenuating circumstances that made it less unbearable than he had sometimes, in his moments of despair, thought it to be. And although no opportunity had yet presented itself for rising from the hum-drum level of a mere clerk to the smart dignity of a private secretary, there now seemed a possibility of the wished-for promotion being within his reach. The Conservative party had now been in office two years, and if Gerard had been fortunate, or had specially distinguished him-

self for official preferment, which we are sorry to say was not the case, he might have had a chance before now. But Sir Antony Flint, who was the first Vice-President under the new Administration, was pledged to a relative of his own; and Gerard's application, which was not put forward with much confidence, or in a manner calculated to ensure success, being merely in the form of a letter from his father to Lord Weatherby, which was enclosed in a note from that nobleman to Sir Antony, without any particular reason being given in support of the request, was, of course, politely declined, with an explanation of Sir Antony's regret that the appointment was already disposed of. The experience of another two years, however, had given Gerard some further ideas as to how these things were generally managed; so that, when Sir Antony's apotheosis was announced, he went straight to his cousin Lady Mount-Easton, and enlisted her sympathies in the matter, with the result which has already been seen.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VICE-PRESIDENT.

It is a popular saying, when any sudden or unexpected event takes place in a man's life, that he wakes and finds himself—famous, ruined, a beggar, a millionaire, or in whatever other position fortune's freaks may have placed him. Although Lord Ravendale had awoke in the ordinary course during the last three days at Newmarket, on any one of which occasions he might, if so disposed, have congratulated himself on being a vice-president, it was not till the morning after his arrival in London that he allowed himself to fully realise the important fact. But being a man of considerable determination and of an evenly-balanced mind, he at once proceeded to "pull himself together," and dismissing for the present Newmarket, racing, and other extraneous matters from his mind, to apply his undivided attention to the cares and responsibilities of his new office.

He was not, indeed, allowed to wait long before being made sensible that he had ceased to be a free man; for while at breakfast, a servant entered with a portentous-looking official box, and announced, with an air of some importance, that a messenger from the General Enquiry Office was waiting in the hall, and would be glad if his lordship could see him for a moment. His lordship's first idea was to consign box, messenger, and all to perdition. Then a hope of momentary reprieve flashed across him; for without an official key it would be impossible for him, no matter how zealous, to open the red-morocco covered royal-arms-stamped piece of Government furniture which lay before him. This hope, however, was but illusory, for on the messenger being shown in, he produced, with every expression of respect, a note from Mr Mills, the permanent secretary, enclosing an official key, and explaining the purport of the contents of the box. So there was nothing for it but to desire the messenger to wait, and tackle the various papers forwarded for his perusal. As these consisted mostly of letters to be signed, and a few unimportant cases that

obviously required nothing more than the Vice-President's initials, it was not long before he had disposed of everything, and ringing the bell, desired that the box might be given to the messenger to be returned to the office. He then proceeded to look through his other correspondence, trusting that, having so far done his duty by the State, it would not be necessary for him to put in an appearance at the office till later in the day.

Having fortified himself by luncheon at the Carlton, where further congratulations were awaiting him, and where he found himself already in danger of being buttonholed by applicants for official preferment, his lordship proceeded to walk leisurely down to Whitehall, and to cast about for his official abode. Its whereabouts having been accurately described to him by his predecessor, Sir Antony Flint, he had no great difficulty in finding his way, and arrived at the General Enquiry Office without having occasion to enlist the services of either policeman or orange-woman as a guide. His coming had evidently been watched for by Messrs Collins & Co., for as he approached the office doors, they were

thrown wide open, and Mr Collins himself, supported by the whole available strength of the staff of messengers, appeared, bowing respectfully, in the foreground. Recognising, in the gentleman who opened the door, the familiar features of an ex-valet and occasional waiter, who had often stood behind his chair at the Speaker's dinner, or ministered to his wants at the supper-tables of many a London ball, and who had probably supplied the information necessary for his identification, his lordship passed through the hall, and piloted by the deferential Mr Collins, proceeded to ascend the stairs, and enter the spacious and still handsome apartment assigned to the Vice-President. Here he found everything prepared for his accommodation : the roomiest of writing-tables, provided with every description of superior stationery ; the most comfortably elevated of standing desks ; the most luxurious of arm-chairs ; an enormous globe ; and everything, in short, that could give an air of comfort to a business room. Nor was Mr Collins behindhand in doing the honours of the occasion.

"Your lordship's letters. Hope your lord-

ship will find everything your lordship wants. Your lordship's private secretary's room is through that door. This bell is for your lordship's private secretary. The other rings downstairs. Any one been to see your lordship? Oh yes; there were several gentlemen called this morning, but I told them that I thought your lordship would hardly be here till this afternoon. These are their cards, my lord. These papers are for your lordship's signature. Mr Mills wished me to let your lordship know that he was ready to wait upon your lordship whenever you wished to see him." And so on, fussing about the room meanwhile in a state of importance befitting the occasion.

Having dismissed his attendant, with an intimation that he would ring when he wanted him again, Lord Ravendale proceeded to establish himself on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire, in the orthodox British attitude, and to take a general view of his new position.

"Deuced comfortable room," he thought; "must have been somebody's drawing-room, I suppose. Wonder if I shall have much bother at this place. Wonder what sort of a

fellow Mills is. Hang it! I suppose I must send for him, or go and see him. Then there's that infernal private secretary to be appointed. Suppose I shall have to ask old Mills about young What's-his-name. Probably he has half-a-dozen fellows much better. However, I had better tackle it at once and get it over." So after a few moments' reflection, his lordship rang the bell, and desired Mr Collins to inform Mr Mills that he should be glad to see him whenever convenient.

Of the more confidential portion of the first interview between the permanent secretary and his new chief it would be unbecoming to speak. As, however, the more important topics to be discussed became exhausted, the conversation began to embrace matters of general detail.

"By the way, my lord," asked Mr Mills, "I don't know whether you have decided anything yet about your private secretary, and whether you propose to take a man out of the office, or to bring in some one from outside."

"Oh! ah!" replied his lordship, glad that the question had been raised for him, "I suppose I shall have to think about that. Of

course, you know, I should not like to pledge myself to any one at present; but supposing I were to take a man out of the office, is there any one in particular you would wish to recommend?"

"Well," answered Mr Mills, delighted at having, as he thought, the question referred to him for decision, "of course you'll take any one you like, and I don't know whether you may have had any one recommended to you already; but if not, I don't think you could do much better than keep on Sir Antony's secretary, Mr Blackett. You would find him very useful, I am sure. He is thoroughly well up in the work, very regular and attentive, and a sharp fellow too; in fact, it would be difficult to find as good a man in the whole office, so far as I am acquainted with it."

"Ah," observed his lordship, "that sounds well. Of course I ought to have some one who is well up in the work, and won't make a fool of himself and me too. By the way, though, talking of others, I had the name of a Mr Courtenay mentioned to me. I know nothing about him, and have no particular

reason for thinking of him; but supposing I did, now, what would you say about him?

"Oh, well," rejoined Mr Mills, his face rather falling; for Blackett was his pet man, and he had reasons for wishing to see him continue as private secretary, "I have nothing to say against young Courtenay—nice gentleman-like young fellow, and I have no doubt will make a good official some day; but of course he is hardly equal to Blackett, who really is a first-class man. At the same time, your lordship must judge for yourself; for the choice of a private secretary is really a personal matter, and I should not like to appear to press any one upon you."

"Thanks very much, my dear Mr Mills," replied Lord Ravendale. "I must just think it over. I suppose there is nothing in the regulations of the office which affects one more than the other?"

"Oh, dear, no," responded Mr Mills. "If your lordship will look at this," opening an Imperial Calendar, "you'll see how they stand. You see the office is divided into three classes —principal clerks, and first and second class clerks. It is not usual for the Vice-President

to take a secretary from the two first classes, —in fact, it might rather interfere with the working of the office,—but, at the same time, if there was any one in the first class whom you particularly fancied, I have no doubt we could manage to make some arrangement."

"Oh no," exclaimed his lordship; "I'm all against interfering with old-established customs. There is a great deal too much of that sort of thing now as it is. Let's see now," looking over the list. "I see Blackett is at the head of the second class. Now I suppose he will soon get promotion into the first class; won't he?"

"Well," said Mr Mills, "that depends on those above him. I should think one or two principals would go soon; in fact, we have been putting a little pressure on one of them to go at once. But sometimes it is rather difficult to clear the way in such a case. Of course, however, he will get his step sooner or later, and I am sure no one deserves it better."

"Oh," observed Lord Ravendale, still looking over the names, "now I see four or five other fellows besides Blackett and Courtenay; what about them?"

"Well my lord, I hardly know what to say. The two next above Courtenay are very good clerks, and do their work very well indeed; but I am not quite sure that you would find either of them the stamp of man for a private secretary. The rest are quite new to the office, and have really no claim; in fact, I hardly know enough of them yet to be able to say anything about them. I should think, therefore, unless you have some one else in view, your choice would lie between Blackett and Courtenay. And now, if your lordship has nothing more to say to me at present, I think I will go back to my work, as we are rather pressed just now."

"Then good-bye for the present, my dear Mr Mills," said Lord Ravendale. "I am sure I am very much obliged to you, and I have no doubt I shall have to trouble you again about something or other before very long."

"Well," he reflected, when the permanent secretary had taken his departure, "I shall have to settle this business somehow, I suppose. Perhaps I had better see both of these beggars. I'll wait a bit though first."

So his lordship proceeded to make a closer

investigation of his room — opening doors, peeping into cupboards, and performing other acts of self-induction. Having completed the tour of the room by giving the great globe a spin which set it revolving at a most alarming rate, he returned to his letters and the other business papers which had been put before him by Mr Mills. Finding that about an hour's work was sufficient to dispose of these, he decided to tackle the question of his private secretary at once, and ringing the bell, requested to see Mr Blackett.

Sir Antony Flint's late private secretary was a young gentleman of about two or three and thirty, who, whether owing to premature baldness or to a precise and formal manner, might have been taken for ten years older. All that had been said in his favour by the permanent secretary was perfectly true. He was a most plodding and indefatigable official; was thoroughly well up in his work, and was gifted with an accuracy of detail that was perfectly alarming. He might, perhaps, have been considered by some as wanting in originality, and as being rather too much saturated with red tape to be likely to rise above the

level of an average Government clerk. This, however, had been no disqualification in the eyes of Sir Antony, himself one of the driest and most unoriginal of men, who preferred that those under him should be mere machines than that they should develop anything in the way of original instincts. But with his more genial successor, who was quite prepared to look upon his future private secretary in the light of a companion, it was quite another thing; and the clerkly self-complacency of the gentleman who now stood before him, serene in the consciousness of his own merits and of Sir Antony's recommendations, was not quite so attractive as Mr Blackett himself imagined.

"By Jove," thought Lord Ravendale, "I'm not so sure about this fellow. He may be a deuced good man, but he looks as great a prig as old Flint himself. Hang it! I must put him off somehow for the present."

So while addressing Mr Blackett with great kindness and courtesy, he took care to let him understand that he had by no means made up his mind.

"I wished to see you, Mr Blackett," he

began, "because you have been very well recommended to me both by Sir Antony Flint and Mr Mills, who speak very highly of you; but I think it only right to tell you that I have had other names mentioned to me; and so, although I am very glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance, I can't promise anything at present, and it is quite possible that I may find myself unable to meet your wishes."

And with a few more well-chosen words, for Lord Ravendale knew as well as most people how to say the right thing in the right place, he dismissed the somewhat astonished Mr Blackett, who had never for a moment supposed it possible that any one could even have been thought of in competition to himself, and resumed his position in front of the fire.

"Hang it all!" was the tenor of his reflections, "this fellow will never do. Couldn't stand him for a day. He's a deal too clever, that's what he is, and knows it too. No! I must just see the other; and if he is anything like the same sort of fellow, I shall have to get some one from outside. What a nuisance

it all is! Don't quite like sending for him just now, though; it might look too marked. By Jove! I'll get him to come to see me at the club."

So having ascertained Gerard's private address from Mr Collins, he wrote a little note to say that if convenient he would be glad to see him at the Carlton at eleven o'clock on the following Monday. And having by this time got through what he considered a fair afternoon's work for his first day at the office, his lordship put on his hat; and it being a Saturday, and no House sitting, betook himself to Grosvenor Square, with the object of shaking off the cares of official life by a ride in the Park while it was still daylight.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRIVATE SECRETARY.

It is hardly necessary to say that when, on returning to his lodgings in the evening, Gerard found a missive from the General Enquiry Office, with the word "Private" at the top of it, and a large "Ravendale" in the left-hand corner, his emotions were of no ordinary description, and that he opened the letter in a state of trembling excitement. He was at first just a little disappointed; for he had, not unnaturally, jumped at the conclusion that it was a formal offer of Lord Ravendale's private secretaryship; and he felt that, till the matter was absolutely settled, the much-coveted prize might at the last moment slip from his grasp. On further reflection, however, he consoled himself with the thought that Lord Ravendale would hardly send for him to tell him that he was unable to give him the place, and that the chances were so

far decidedly on his side. It was very trying, however, to have to wait for another day and two whole nights before knowing his fate; and it is not to be wondered at, therefore, that his sleep that Saturday night was somewhat broken by alternate visions of success and disappointment.

His first thought next morning was to see Lady Mount-Easton, in case she might be able to throw some light on the subject. So after having duly attended morning church, a habit of his boyhood which he had stuck to very regularly, he made his way to Park Lane, where he knew that at lunch-time on Sundays he would not be considered an intruder.

Lady Mount-Easton had, however, nothing further to tell him; for her acquaintance with Lord Ravendale, though sufficient to justify her in recommending her cousin to his good offices, was not of an unusually intimate character; and having, probably, no wish to see her till the question of his private-secretaryship was settled one way or another, he had not thrown himself in her way. But on hearing of Lord Ravendale's letter, she was quite disposed to take the most favourable view of

Gerard's prospects, and probably felt pretty certain in her own mind that her recommendation had not been thrown away. So she gave Gerard every encouragement, and sent him away very happy.

"Ah, Lily!" he said, having outstayed for a moment an elderly but devoted nobleman and a couple of Guardsmen, who had also availed themselves of Lady Mount-Easton's hospitality, "if I get this place, it will be all owing to you."

Lily was a pet name which had clung to Lady Mount-Easton ever since her childhood, and which, though considered hardly dignified enough to be habitually applied to the future Marchioness of St. Ives, was still in occasional use among her own family, many of whom, indeed, had never known her by any other name.

"Dear Jerry!" she replied, "I shall be so pleased if you get it, and I think, you know, you really ought to. You have been five years now in your office—have you not?—and it would be a pity if you were not to get something of the sort soon. I think you'll find it will be all right."

So she dismissed him with a sweet smile

and a warm shake of the hand, which sent Gerard away more in love with his charming cousin than ever.

It was with a beating heart that at eleven o'clock the next morning Gerard presented himself at the Carlton Club and inquired for Lord Ravendale. As it happened, that nobleman was in the hall at the moment, in earnest colloquy with two other well-known statesmen; though whether their conversation was of affairs of State or the prospects of the Two Thousand might have been a matter of speculation. Hearing his name, Lord Ravendale turned round, and guessing at once who it was, came forward and made himself known to Gerard.

"Ah, Courtenay," he said, with a friendly smile, "glad to see you. I daresay you won't mind waiting two or three minutes;" so desiring a boy in buttons to show Mr Courtenay into the waiting-room, he resumed the thread of his conversation, and Gerard was conducted to a small but comfortably-furnished room at the end of a long passage, and left to himself and the *Times*. He had not long to wait, however; for in less than

five minutes the door was opened and Lord Ravendale appeared. He had been rather favourably impressed with Gerard at first sight, and felt more and more decided that Blackett would never do.

"By Jove, this looks rather more like business," he thought, as he came down the passage to where Gerard was waiting. "The fellow is a gentleman anyhow, and that's half the battle. But he may be a fool for all that; I must mind what I'm about."

A few minutes' conversation, however, convinced his lordship that, although Gerard might not possess the same official experience or the same knowledge of details as Mr Blackett, he was, nevertheless, no fool. He soon made up his mind, in fact, that if the great Mr Mills was not prepared to offer any serious objection, he would give him a trial. He confined himself, however, at present to telling Gerard that he had heard about him from Lady Mount-Easton, but that he had not yet quite made up his mind; and that, as Gerard probably knew, there were others whose names had also been well recommended to him. But Gerard felt somehow or other

that the result of the interview had not been unfavourable; and it was with a light step and a feeling of hope that he wended his way across St James's Park and entered his accustomed room at the General Enquiry Office, to await the course of events.

He was not kept very long in suspense, for at about three o'clock the great Mr Collins in person, who did not as a rule condescend to show himself in the upper and less dignified regions of the office, entered his room with the announcement that Lord Ravendale would be glad to speak to him. Gerard felt that the wished-for moment had arrived, and following the official Mercury downstairs, found himself in the presence of the Vice-President and Mr Mills, and divined at a glance that the thing was done,

"Then I'll leave you just now, my lord, as you may wish to speak to Courtenay," observed Mr Mills as Gerard entered; and forthwith departed, leaving them alone together.

Gerard hardly knew whether he stood on his head or his heels, and felt, as he afterwards described it, much as he had done when sent

for by the head of the football eleven at Harrow to be told that he might "get his shirt."

"Well, Courtenay," began Lord Ravendale, in the most friendly tone, "I have been talking to Mr Mills about you, and I am glad to say he gives you a very good character; so if you are willing, I shall be very glad to take you as my private secretary."

Gerard, although to some extent prepared for this realisation of his hopes, was only able to stammer out a few words of gratitude, and of hopes, which he felt were very badly expressed, that Lord Ravendale would find him satisfactory.

"Oh, well," said his lordship, who hated everything in the way of expression of feeling, and dreaded nothing so much as being thanked, "it is all right then, and I have no doubt we shall get on first rate. We shall have some things to talk about, I suppose, and I dare say you'll be able to tell me all about the office. In the meantime, if it is convenient to you to begin at once, there are some letters here I should be glad to have answered. I have written what I want said on the backs of

them, and you might just try your hand on one, and show it to me before going on with the others." For although Lord Ravendale might appear to some to be indifferent and careless on certain matters, he was particular to a degree about his personal correspondence, and had no notion of being subjected to any stereotyped ideas of red tape or official routine.

So Gerard took possession of the letters, and with the sensation of treading on air, established himself in the adjoining room, which he had often before entered in the course of business, and which it had been one of his fondest dreams to inhabit as a recognised and legitimate occupant. Having selected from the bundle what appeared to him a representative type of communication, namely, an application from one of Lord Ravendale's constituents for a "Government appointment," a piece of preferment which, without any particular branch of the public service being indicated, it is popularly supposed by a good many people that a Minister can at any time confer by a stroke of his pen, he proceeded to answer the applicant in the sense indi-

cated by Lord Ravendale's pencil notes on the envelope, clothed in his own very best official language, and then took it in for his lordship's inspection.

With a few trifling alterations, which, however, were quite sufficient to indicate to Gerard the style in which the new Vice-President wished his correspondence to be conducted, the letter was approved, and Gerard set to work to dispose of the others in a similar fashion.

It is unnecessary to follow our hero through the whole of his first afternoon's work as a private secretary. There was, of course, much to be done in the way of explaining official papers, interviewing office-seekers, and making arrangements for the general conduct of the work; and Gerard had little time for contemplating himself in his new position. When, however, Lord Ravendale had gone down to the House and left him alone to finish up his afternoon's work, he began to realise the fact that he had actually arrived at the much-hoped-for dignity of a private secretary, and for the moment it appeared to him as if the world had nothing better to offer. His official life up to

the present had not, on the whole, been a happy one; for though he had by degrees become accustomed to it, and was to some extent reconciled to his position, there were times when the old feeling of despair and hopelessness would return upon him, and he would feel as if he had made an irreparable mistake.

It is true that the emoluments attached to his new office were not such as would at first sight impress the uninitiated with any particular sense of vastness, being limited to the modest sum of £200 per annum. But Gerard's ideas were by no means of an extravagant order, and his tastes being simple and inexpensive, he had hitherto contrived to exist very comfortably on what might have appeared to others to be decidedly limited means. The pay of the General Enquiry Office was so far superior to that of many other offices in that the commencing salary for the lowest class of clerks was £250, instead of £150, or in some cases a bare £100 a year. Gerard's salary had now risen to £350, so that with the additional £200 as private secretary and an allowance from his father of £50, he was now in the enjoyment of the by no means

despicable income of £600 a year. Out of this he paid £70 a year for a modest lodging in the neighbourhood of Portman Square, and of course had to keep himself. But by strict economy he had hitherto found himself able, after making due allowance for lodging, subsistence, club expenses, and other necessary items, to devote the best part of £150 a year to his own uses; and being, as has already been observed, of a quiet and rather retiring disposition, with a strongly-developed turn for field-sports, his inclinations led him rather to a study of how best to utilise his modest means in this direction than to spend his money in "knocking about" in general society, after the manner of most young men of his age and social standing. With this laudable object in view, he had concentrated his energies upon doing as much in the way of hunting as his leave and the state of his pocket would admit of; and having, by the help of an occasional mount from his cousin Lord Weatherby and a little occasional hiring, got through one or two winters with great satisfaction to himself, he had about a year before the commencement of our story become, for the first time, the pro-

prietor of a piece of horse-flesh of his own. The noble animal in question had been one of Lord Weatherby's hunting stud, and was a well-bred and thoroughly safe and steady hunter. But having been a good deal knocked about at one time and another, and being just the least bit touched in the wind, he had lately been hardly up to the amount of work required for a huntsman's horse, and when spring came round it was proposed that his name should be included in the annual list of horses to be sold at Tattersall's. Gerard had happened to be staying at Storrington at the time, and having been once or twice mounted on the quadruped in question, had fairly earned Lord Weatherby's approbation by the way in which he had ridden him. So being kindly disposed towards his cousin, and knowing that the horse was not likely to fetch much at auction, Lord Weatherby offered to make Gerard a present of him, an offer which was most gratefully accepted. It is true that at the moment our friend had no very definite ideas as to how or where he was to keep a horse, but this was a matter of detail. His first thought on returning to

London was to look about for suitable accommodation for his stud, and for a functionary to act in the capacity of groom. As regards the former, he received unexpected assistance in the shape of a stall gratis; for, having confided his position to the Dowager Lady Narborough, a sort of relative by marriage, to whom he had gone to pay his respects one Sunday afternoon, that kind-hearted old lady, always ready to do young men a good turn, had suggested to him that as her own pair of fat carriage-horses only occupied two out of the four stalls of her stables in Eaton Square, he might, if he chose, make arrangements with her coachman for the accommodation of his own animal on such terms as might be agreed upon. This offer was too good to be refused, and it was not long before Gerard had interviewed the functionary in question, with the result that by the time the horse was sent up to London a stall was ready for his reception, and a helper, to be subsidised by Gerard, but under the supervision of her ladyship's coachman, was in readiness to perform the duties of groom.

Gerard was now, therefore, the master of a

moderately sound and thoroughly "confidential" hunter, on terms which involved very little outlay on his own account; and it would be difficult to exaggerate the satisfaction which his new acquisition gave him. Great was the care taken of the noble animal during the summer, which was none the less enjoyable to Gerard for his having a horse of his own to disport himself upon in Rotten Row; and solemn were the consultations with Lady Narborough's coachman as to the best means of getting him into condition for the next hunting season. So what between an occasional day with a pack of harriers within reach of London, and periodical expeditions to certain packs of foxhounds farther a-field, Gerard continued to get through the next winter with a considerable amount of enjoyment; and by taking great care of his horse, found that he was quite up to about one day a week with the foxhounds and a day now and then with the harriers. He began, in short, to tread pretty regularly in the steps of the immortal Mr Jorrocks, for which hero of the chase he had the most profound regard and admiration. Of course, however, his hunting

ardour was considerably limited by the smallness of his stud; and his first thought in regard to his increased official income was that he might now be able to keep another horse.

But apart from any consideration of sport or amusement, there was much involved in his new position for which Gerard felt very thankful. Five years in a subordinate position at a Government office is not calculated to excite any deep feeling of enthusiasm for the service; and Gerard, although he had done his best to get up an interest in his work, had of late felt thoroughly sick and weary of it. Now everything was to be changed; he was about to abandon a life of routine and drudgery for the dignified bustle and pleasant mystery enveloping the life of a private secretary to a Minister, and the whole world of statesmanship seemed to lie open before him. It was an additional gratification to him, moreover, to think that he was to be associated with a chief whose general tastes seemed to lie in much the same direction as his own, and that there was every prospect of his being brought in

contact with others of the same standing, from whose society his position as a mere clerk in a Government office had to some extent debarred him.

It was, therefore, with a light heart that he finished up his first day's work as a private secretary, and then went upstairs before leaving, to make arrangements for the transfer of certain office properties from the room which he had occupied for so long, and where he had passed through so many alternations of hope and despondency. It was now late, and most of the members of the office had left; so that silence reigned in the usually busy rooms and passages. As Gerard glanced round the familiar apartment and its mixture of matter-of-fact official surroundings and some small attempts at personal comfort, he could not help indulging in a lingering feeling of affection towards the old room, which he was at the same time about to leave with such hearty good-will; and perhaps experienced something of that regard which is said to be not uncommon in the case of prisoners who, when at last released from a long confinement, look round for the last time upon their prison

walls with a sensation almost approaching to tenderness. But above all, in Gerard's heart was a feeling of great thankfulness, and a sincere resolution to do his best in the new line of life which had been opened to him ; and in this happy state of mind we will leave him for the present.

CHAPTER VIII.

"LADY NARBOROUGH'S CARRIAGE!"

THE London season was drawing to a close. The days of the session were numbered, although it was dying hard; and it was only with the greatest difficulty that the whips on either side were able to keep a sufficient number of worn-out and grumbling legislators in their places. The State balls and concerts were all over, and the Lord Chamberlain was able, for the first time for months, to enjoy an immunity from applications in every form, and on every conceivable ground, for the much-coveted honour of an invitation to Buckingham Palace. The crowd of riders in Rotten Row was diminishing daily; it was becoming possible to drive from the Marble Arch to Hyde Park Corner without any material check; and the last Monday's *Morning Post* had for the first time made its appearance without the usual list of fashionable arrange-

ments. Not, however, that the season was going to expire without a parting kick; and there were still two or three little dances and other entertainments to come off, which were perhaps none the less appreciated for being the last events before the fall of the curtain.

It was at daybreak then, on a lovely morning during the last week of July, that one of these valedictory entertainments at an old-fashioned house in Berkeley Square was beginning to break up. The regular alternations of dances had long been abandoned, and the band had settled down into a continuous waltz, which, judging from the pertinacity with which it was being kept up by the few couples left in the room, showed no signs of being brought to a speedy conclusion. Not a "wallflower" was to be seen, and only an occasional chaperon, for no one would care to remain so late in the ball-room except for real hard work. But downstairs there was still a crowd; there was not a seat to be had in the supper-room, and a good deal of quiet "business" was being done in the cloak-room and in the hall.

"Well, Master Jerry," observed a sprightly

young person, of whose face an ample "cloud" left nothing to be seen except a pair of mischievous dark eyes and a set of handsome but rather irregular features, "When shall you and I meet again? I suppose this is about your last appearance in public too; is it not?"

"Yes," replied Gerard, "I expect to get away on Thursday, and I am going down home for some cricket, which is more in my line than this sort of thing, you know. I must say, though, this has been a very jolly ball; and now it's the end of the season, I can't help wishing I had done a little more in this way. But then they are not all as pleasant as this, you know; now if one always felt sure of meeting you, for instance"——

"Oh, yes; we know all about that," interrupted his fair companion, in the most flippant manner. "However, you always were a perfect idiot. What are you going to do all the autumn?"

"Oh, well," replied Gerard, "I don't exactly know. You see it depends a good deal on my chief. I shall get a bit of a holiday now, but I fancy he has some idea of being about London during September and October, so I

shall have to be here too. But he is such an awfully good fellow that I could always manage to get away for a bit every now and then, I am sure. But I have not got any real engagement till November, and then I am going down to Sydmonton for some cover-shooting. That's a long time to come yet, though, and a great many things may happen between this and then. What are you going to do? I suppose you'll go down to Scotland first."

"Oh, yes," replied the lady; "the usual thing, I suppose—visit about till November, and then go and vegetate at home. Perhaps mamma will ask you to come and see us, if you behave yourself. Here she is at last," as a stately dame appeared in the doorway of the supper-room, escorted by an elderly admirer, who showed no signs of having found the task of providing for the requirements of a hungry chaperon by any means an unpleasant one. For the Dowager Lady Narborough had been a beauty in her day; and though in the now portly and well-developed frame there were but distant traces of the figure that, thirty years ago, had been considered one of the

finest in London, there still remained the same brightness of disposition and kindness of heart that had through life endeared her to all with whom she came in contact. Her daughter, Lady Adelaide Middleton, could hardly be considered as bearing a striking likeness to her mother; for although by no means a bad-looking girl, with the exception of fine eyes and hair she had no particular claims to downright beauty. Neither had she her mother's charm of temper and disposition; and although she could be most gracious and pleasing at times, she was apt to be a little uncertain in this respect, and was rather too fond of saying sharp things to be universally popular. She had, however, inherited her mother's fine figure, or a very fair share of it, and when she was really disposed to make herself pleasant, there were few more attractive girls in London. On the present occasion she had enjoyed her ball, and was in a particularly good temper; and she was therefore quite inclined to make herself agreeable to her cousin, or so-called cousin, Gerard Courtenay, for whom she had a certain liking, which, without in any way partaking of real sentiment, she had no objection

to allowing to drift into a mild form of flirtation when nothing better presented itself.

"Oh, there you are, Adelaide!" exclaimed Lady Narborough. "Why, I thought you were still dancing. Now, Gerard, you had better go and call the carriage. Thank you, Sir Thomas, so much," to the gallant old warrior who was now enshrouding her ample and still well-shaped shoulders in a large fur cloak. "Dear me, Adelaide, you naughty child, it is quite light; you ought to have been in bed long ago. Now, Gerard, have they answered?"

"Why, mamma," laughed Lady Adelaide, "the carriage has been up twice already, and here it is again," as a stentorian voice from the hall door announced, in tones of slight remonstrance, that Lady Narborough's carriage stopped "the whole of the way," implying thereby a degree of obstructiveness on the part of that highly respectable vehicle, which, if persisted in, would seem likely to interfere with the departure of the other guests.

"Coming out!" was now the word, as her ladyship, with many smiles and nods to her acquaintances in the waiting crowd, worked her way through the hall on the arm of the

bold Sir Thomas, leaving Lady Adelaide to follow with Gerard, to where the linkman, a scarlet-waistcoated gentleman of easy manners and a profound knowledge of the world, was awaiting her exit with his now superfluous lantern.

"Step here, my lady. Hope your ladyship enjoyed the ball. Had a very hard time to-night, my lady. Got no voice left at all," intruding his hat at the carriage window. "Drive on, coachman" (seeing no chance of a shilling). "Who's next?" again in the most stentorian of tones.

"Good-night, Gerard," called out Lady Narborough, as the carriage began to move off; "no use offering you a lift, I know." And off they drove.

Gerard stood for a moment looking after them with a pleasing sensation of regret. He had enjoyed the ball very much, and had danced a good deal with Lady Adelaide, who had certainly made herself unusually charming, and had given him a little squeeze of the hand as she got into the carriage, that was still thrilling very pleasantly through his pulses. Not that he was in love with her;

for he knew her well enough, and had sufficient sense to be aware that such a proceeding on his part, although it might possibly amuse her very much, would, as far as he was concerned, be little short of madness. But without being unusually susceptible in such matters, he was not insensible to the fascinations of his *soi-disant* cousin, and none the less perhaps because it was not very often that she condescended to exercise them upon him. She was fond of him, however, in a certain way, and found considerable occupation and amusement in alternately teasing and making much of him. Their relationship was not really a very close one, being merely derived from the circumstance that her brother, the present Lord Narborough, had married a second cousin of Gerard's. Lady Adelaide and he were therefore only cousins by the merest courtesy. But the Weatherby and Narborough families had always been more or less intimate; and the Dowager Lady Narborough had, as has been seen, taken rather a liking to Gerard, so that when Lord Narborough's marriage took place, it was found much the simplest way to consider Gerard as included in the arrange-

ment; and, as may be inferred from the scraps of conversation we have just recorded, they were upon terms of considerable intimacy.

So Gerard looked after the rapidly vanishing carriage with a feeling that was approaching to tenderness; till, recognising the fact that such weakness could not exhibit him to advantage in the eyes of that profound philosopher and personal acquaintance of his own, the before-mentioned linkman, he turned into the house again; and, not caring to spoil the pleasant termination of his night's amusement by mingling further with the rapidly-departing crowd, he proceeded to get his coat and hat, and lighting a cigarette at the lantern of his friend outside, started to walk quietly home.

Gerard's lodgings were in Seymour Street, Portman Square, and therefore in a diametrically opposite direction to Lady Narborough's house in Eaton Square. It was, as we have said, a lovely morning; and, as he walked up Hill Street in the direction of Park Lane, the freshness of early dawn was most enjoyable. Not a sound was to be heard except the distant rumbling of the streams of market-

carts that for some hours past had been converging towards Covent Garden along the great arteries of Piccadilly and Oxford Street; the atmosphere was as yet unpolluted by smoke; and even the hard, uncompromising outlines of the dingy old Mayfair houses looked almost picturesque in the crisp morning air. Gerard walked leisurely on, in calm enjoyment of his cigarette, till, as he turned into Park Lane, he came upon a gentleman, like himself, in evening costume, though with a pipe instead of a cigarette in his mouth, who was leaning against a lamp-post and apparently in amicable conversation with a policeman. As Gerard approached, he turned round, and disclosed the features of the identical individual whom, in company with our hero, we had the pleasure of introducing to our readers in the first chapter of this veracious history.

"Hollo! Why, George, what on earth are you doing here?" was Gerard's first exclamation.

"Doing, my dear fellow?" was the reply; "why, I'm just having a pipe, and a chat with 92 A, who'd be smoking too, if he dared,

poor chap. Hang it all! why should you children of pleasure have the monopoly of the best part of the morning? Why, I got up on purpose to see the sunrise."

"Oh, yes," replied Gerard, laughing, "so likely, and in your evening clothes too. But I say, bar sell, old fellow, where have you been dissipating all night? Come, I'll walk down as far as Piccadilly with you, or you can walk up to the Marble Arch with me."

"No," returned the other, "I've just come from up there, and I'll be hanged if I go back again. Well," as they linked arms and walked down Park Lane together, after a friendly parting with 92 A, "what sort of a night have you had in the gay world?"

"Oh, I've had a very jolly ball," answered Gerard. "But I say, what have you really been doing? You're about the last fellow I should have expected to meet out here on the loose this time in the morning."

"Well," replied his companion, "the fact is, I've been dining with an old fellow in Cumberland Place, who's desperate keen about chess; and after every one had gone, we got talking about it, and ended by beginning to play

about twelve o'clock, and only left off half an hour ago. Devilish good game chess. I don't know anything one gets more engrossed in."

"And how did you get on with the old boy?" inquired Gerard, airily. He was in a light-hearted frame of mind that morning, and quite inclined to take a cheerful view of things in general.

"Oh, well," returned his friend, "we weren't such a bad match. I'm rather keen about it too, you know, and can play a bit sometimes. But he got the best of it on the whole. I say, though, we must go to bed; why, it's past four, and I've got to be up earlyish too. So farewell, old fellow, and thanks for the benefit of your company so far. Daresay I'll come and look you up at that office of yours in a day or two. I shall be going off soon now, and mayn't see much more of you at present."

"All right, old man," said Gerard, now beginning to yawn a little; "you'll find me there all day now, as we're hard at work finishing up." And with a parting nod to his friend he turned back up Park Lane, and walked briskly home.

From what we have already said of Gerard Courtenay, it will not perhaps be considered remarkable that, among his numerous faults or deficiencies there should be a certain difficulty or backwardness, owing, in a great measure, to constitutional shyness and reserve, in making friends; and that although he had now been some years about London, and had a fairly extensive circle of acquaintances, the number of his intimate associates should still be very small. Being, however, by no means unconscious of or insensible to his own shortcomings in this respect, he was disposed to cling all the more closely to those whom he felt that he could really call his friends; and of these, George Morton was perhaps the one whose companionship was more agreeable to him than that of any other.

George Morton was one of those persons who, without appearing to fill any particular position in life, are generally accepted on all sides as perfectly natural institutions. He was the only son of a clergyman of old family, though limited means, in East Kent; and having as a boy shown a considerable turn for mechanics, it had been intended that he should

be a civil engineer. With this object in view, he had, on leaving Winchester, been regularly entered as an apprentice at the locomotive shops of one of the northern railways, where he had worked for about two years, during which time he had become acquainted with the rudiments of the profession, and might probably in time have developed into a good practical engineer. But being of a somewhat restless turn of mind, he had, after the first novelty of the thing had worn off, become tired of the necessary drudgery involved in the thorough mastery of the details of an engineer's profession; and having, by the recent death of his father, succeeded to a small sum of ready money, amounting to about £3000, he turned a deaf ear to the entreaties of his relations and the remonstrances of his employers, who had recognised his undoubted talents and were sorry to part with him, and embarking the greater part of his small capital in a South-American cattle venture, sailed for the Argentine Republic, in company with two other equally restless and adventurous spirits.

There he remained for five years, during

which time he learned a good deal about cattle, became an excellent horseman, and in the course of three prosperous seasons earned his share of a very respectable "pile." But at the moment when everything seemed most prosperous, and the adventurous trio were congratulating themselves on the prospect of being in a fair way to make their fortune, their luck suddenly turned. A raid of Indians swept off nearly every head of their cattle, the "ranch" was burned over their heads, and they barely escaped with their lives. And, to crown their misfortune, on repairing to Buenos Ayres to seek advice from the authorities as to what was the best thing to do, they found that the bank in which they had invested their earnings had stopped payment, and that they were ruined and almost penniless in a foreign and barely civilised country. The partnership thus broke up perforce, one of the friends returning to England, and another obtaining employment as a headman and overlooker in a similar establishment to that in which he had himself been lately a partner. Morton, who had had about enough of cattle-driving for the present, determined

to see whether his engineering education could not be utilised in some way or other, and had in fact secured an engagement as a fireman on a new line of railway, when a letter arrived from England to inform him that by the death of an uncle he had come into a small independence of about £600 a year. This sudden and somewhat unexpected change in his fortune not unnaturally decided him upon altering his plans. He had now been five years absent from home, and had had a good deal of knocking about; and although he had no very special ties or associations in England, he could not resist a certain longing to get back to civilised life again. So without waiting for remittances, he contrived, by the sale of a horse, a rifle, and a few articles saved from the wreck of the once prosperous cattle-farm, to raise enough money to pay his outstanding expenses and defray the cost of a passage to England.

Such, at least, was George Morton's account of his career in South America. But respecting the three or four years that followed his return to England he was very reticent; and all that his few intimate friends were able to

say as to this period of his existence was that, after living in London for about six months, he had suddenly gone abroad again, and had only reappeared at rare intervals, when he seemed to shun the society of his fellow-men more than ever. For George Morton was, like Gerard Courtenay, although not altogether for the same reason, a man of few friends; and the rough, self-reliant life he had led in South America had imparted a certain hardness to his character which did not render him a very attractive companion to most young men of his age. But about this he cared, or seemed to care, little; and he was the last man in the world to seek a friendship where it was not voluntarily offered. As one of the Mortons of Reedham, one of the oldest families in Kent, he would have had no difficulty in obtaining access to at least a very respectable section of London society, especially as he was a well-built, handsome fellow, and was known to have "something of his own." But he preferred to go his own way; and though he might occasionally be seen at a quiet dinner-party, or, on very rare occasions, for half an hour at a ball, he was com-

pletely out of the regular circle of pleasure-seekers, and in a very short time began to be set down by the ladies of his acquaintance as "rather a strange young man; very nice, certainly, but seems odd, and evidently some mystery about him."

He and Gerard had met at one of the old-fashioned taverns that are still to be found here and there in the neighbourhood of Fleet Street, where the latter had found himself one evening when, feeling more than usually despondent about his position and prospects at the General Enquiry Office, he had taken a solitary walk up the Strand and into the City without knowing exactly where he was going, but feeling a desire to get away and be by himself. They had sat at the same table, and had got into conversation over a newspaper; and having somewhat outstayed the other *habitués* of the place, had walked back together along the Strand. Morton, who was a member of a literary and theatrical club in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, had asked Gerard in; an invitation to dinner followed, and was accepted; and in a very short time the two became fast friends. Something

about Gerard had attracted Morton from the first, and he had exerted himself more than was his wont to draw him out and cultivate his acquaintance. And Gerard, who, although shy and reserved with most people, was of an affectionate and by no means unsociable disposition, was only too glad to welcome a friend who was evidently a thorough gentleman, and whose mental superiority and wider experience of the world he was quite willing to acknowledge. So their intimacy grew and prospered, and at the period of our story there were no two firmer friends in London.

CHAPTER IX.

SYDMONTON PLACE.

The old-fashioned type of country-house, with its old-fashioned ideas of hospitality, is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The increased facilities for locomotion, the spread of "society" periodicals, and the universal desire to outshine their neighbours and appear to be something better than they really are, have within a comparatively recent period done a great deal to change the tone and character of country gentlemen of every grade. London manners and London ideas are imported into the most remote country districts; and the Londoner who is not particularly well up in the current gossip of Mayfair and St James's Street, but who flatters himself that the mere fact of hailing from the metropolis will constitute him a social authority in the particular rural district which he may be honouring by a visit, will probably find to

his surprise and disgust that he is a good deal more "out of it" than the simple country people he has come down to impress; who are, in fact, able to enlighten and correct him on many points where he had fondly hoped to shine forth as a social authority. Country society has, in fact, undergone a great revolution, and the patriarchal yet dignified simplicity of the Hall or the Grange is being rapidly metamorphosed into a *réchauffé* of the least attractive characteristics of London drawing-rooms and London clubs.

Here and there, however, a relic of the past is still to be found. In some cases the consciousness of an unassailable social position has had the effect of engendering an indifference to the caprices of fashion; and in others there has been sufficient good sense to see the folly of striving after what is only likely to end in disappointment. And where this happy state of things is still to be found, the effect on the unprejudiced observer is likely to be as pleasing as the contrast between the world-worn graces of a "professional beauty" and the fresh and unspoilt charms of an unsophisticated country girl.

Among such landmarks of a bygone age it would have been difficult, at the period of our story, to find a more characteristic specimen than Sydmonton Place, Wealdshire, the residence from time immemorial of the ancient family of Sydmonton. So ancient, indeed, are the family traditions that the name, which was originally spelt Sedminton, is to be found among the records of persons of distinction in the south-eastern districts of England at the time of the Norman Conquest; and one John Sedminton, a baron of Kent, is chronicled as having valiantly defended his native town against William of Normandy. Without, however, troubling the reader further with the pedigree of this stupendously respectable family, it may be sufficient to state that towards the close of the seventeeth century its then representative had been raised to the peerage under the title of Baron Sydmonton, and that the present peer was the fourth Viscount.

Lord Sydmonton, who was now an elderly man, had for many years led a somewhat retired life; and although a potentate of more than usual distinction in his own part of the

country, was but little known in either social or political circles in London. He had in early life been for a short time in the diplomatic service, and had subsequently, as Mr. Sydmonton, represented the now disfranchised borough of Middlehaven in Parliament. But he had never had any real taste for political life, and had very soon become tired of the House of Commons; so that when two years afterwards he succeeded to the title, he was only too ready to take advantage of the excuse offered by the cares and obligations of a large estate for absenting himself almost entirely from London, and withdrawing to the seclusion of his ancestral domains. Here for several years he lived in comparative retirement, shutting up the stately reception-rooms, and living in bachelor simplicity in two or three rooms at the extreme end of the house. Being the only very large proprietor in that part of the country, he had absolutely no neighbours of his own rank, and but few others with whom he cared to associate; for his lordship was at that time of a shy and retiring disposition, and duly impressed, moreover, with the danger to be apprehended

from designing mammas and fascinating daughters. Having, however, succeeded in escaping whatever perils of this description had beset his path in London, he found it a comparatively easy matter to shelter himself behind the entrenchments of Sydmonton Place; and had long ago been set down by the neighbourhood as a confirmed old bachelor. But he was only too happy to be let alone, and left to the free and unrestricted development of his own tastes and ideas, of which it would have been difficult to say whether a passion for ancient classics or a devotion to modern field-sports was the most absorbing. He was a profound Greek scholar, and in addition to having spent more than one winter between the plains of Marathon and the supposed site of Troy, was known to be the author of a more than usually erudite treatise on the Grecian drama, and was suspected of having translated the Alcestis of Euripides into fairly readable English verse. He was, moreover, a great collector of antiquities, both literary and otherwise, and the Sydmonton collection of black-letter books is still justly celebrated throughout Europe. At

the same time, he was passionately fond of field-sports, and although the great preponderance of woodland prevents that part of Wealdshire from being a hunting country, the natural facilities for game-preserving are very great, and of these Lord Sydmonton availed himself to the utmost. Not that he was by any means a devotee of that particular form of poultry slaughter known as battue-shooting, which indeed, in common with many other modern innovations, he held in supreme contempt. And although he maintained a large staff of keepers and watchers, their duties, when not employed in attending on their master, were principally confined to keeping the woods quiet, and restraining the juvenile population from bird-nesting during the hatching season. For although devoted to shooting, his lordship was not unmindful of the interests of his poorer neighbours and dependants, by whom he was universally beloved; and as every labourer on the place knew that he was certain at the proper time to get his due share of the rabbits that he saw playing about the sunny banks which sheltered his own well-built cottage from the prevailing south-west wind,

it was not surprising that he should himself come to take a pride and interest in the game that was his landlord's delight, and that poaching should, therefore, be almost unknown. On the last occasion, indeed, when a gang of professionals from the nearest town had attempted to do a little business on an outlying portion of the property, the story went that the whole of the inhabitants had risen like one man against the would-be depredators, who, having been somewhat roughly handled and half-drowned in the muddiest of Wealdshire ponds, were hunted out of the district with an intimation that, if they attached any special value to their lives or limbs, they would do well to select some other estate than Sydmonton as the scene of any future operations.

So Lord Sydmonton was enabled to pursue his favourite sport with the hearty co-operation of both tenantry and labourers; and he might, indeed, be said to have brought the art of honest old-fashioned shooting to perfection. For although, as we have said, he religiously set his face against battue-shooting in the ordinary acceptance of the term, there was hardly a day during the season when shooting

of some sort was not going on over some part of his extensive property; and there were many special beats where as good a day's sport could be met with as would satisfy any but the most insatiable glutton.

Year after year rolled by, and Lord Sydmonton continued to lead a peaceful and uneventful life, happy in his own pursuits, and desiring nothing better than to be left to himself and the society of a few chosen friends, of literary or sporting tastes corresponding with his own, whom he would invite down to Sydmonton for the shooting season, and whose regular and protracted visits caused them to be looked upon by the establishment almost as members of the family. This state of things might indeed have gone on till both his lordship and his friends had grown grey together. But his day and his fate came at last; and a thunderbolt burst upon the neighbourhood one morning in the shape of a rumour, which was not long in receiving substantial confirmation, that Lord Sydmonton was going to be married. Nor was the interest of the good people of that part of Wealdshire by any means lessened when it became known that the

future Viscountess was of a Wealdshire family, and might, in fact, be considered as one of themselves.

Among his lordship's oldest and dearest friends was the Rev. Samuel Tudway, canon of Newminster and rector of Lullingston, a good-sized village nestling at the foot of the downs, about fifteen miles from Sydmonton Place. This estimable divine had been Lord Sydmonton's tutor at Cambridge, and had been the principal means of developing and maturing his taste for classical literature. They had continued firm friends ever since, and it was through Lord Sydmonton's interest, perhaps none the less efficacious for being so rarely exerted, that the ex-tutor had been appointed to a canonry of Newminster Cathedral. Without in any way approaching the character of the typical sporting parson, the Rev. Samuel dearly loved an occasional relaxation from the duties of a large and straggling parish, which he discharged with a zeal and conscientiousness that endeared him to rich and poor alike, in the shape of a little honest sport; and no better or keener shot was to be found among the friendly circle who would assemble at Syd-

monton during the shooting season, where his genial presence was welcomed equally by his noble entertainer and by the old keeper and his myrmidons, who one and all looked upon "Paa'son" as the impersonification of clerical dignity, and who, if they had been called upon to define their ideas of Church and State, would have unhesitatingly expressed their opinion in favour of "Paa'son" as the one, and "my lord" as the other.

It will readily be understood, then, that when, one cold winter's night, the "Paa'son's" outdoor factotum and man-of-all-work arrived at Sydmonton on his master's horse, with a scared and sorrowful face, and a note from the old housekeeper (for the old rector had long been a widower,) to the effect that he had been taken seriously ill, and that in his occasional intervals of consciousness he could talk of nothing but his lordship, the distress that was felt throughout the household, from Lord Sydmonton down to the steward's-room boy, was both deep and genuine. His lordship, indeed, made no attempt to conceal his emotion; and though he had had a long and tiring day, lost no time in ordering out his carriage,

a light, old-fashioned sort of curricle, with various obsolete leather contrivances for keeping out wind and rain, and hurried over to Lullingston as fast as a pair of well-bred and fast-trotting cobs could take him. It was a melancholy satisfaction to find, on his arrival, that his old friend and preceptor was still conscious, though evidently fast sinking. There was no appearance of physical pain, though something evidently weighed heavily on the dying man's mind. But Lord Sydmonton's arrival was evidently a great relief to him, and a ray of pleasure shot across his face, as, raising himself in the arm-chair where he had been seized with his attack, and whence he had not been moved, he signed to those about him to leave them alone together. What passed between them was never divulged, but that it was satisfactory to the dying man there could be no doubt. For when the old housekeeper and Matthew, the faithful servitor who had carried the sad news to Sydmonton, peeped through the open door, unable to restrain their anxiety, all traces of care had disappeared from their beloved master's face, and he was leaning back quietly in his chair,

with his hands clasped in that of his old pupil. He lingered through the greater part of the night, and passed away peacefully just before dawn.

The anxiety that had oppressed the rector's mind was not unnatural. As has been said, he had been a widower some years, having married early in life, and had been left with an only child, a girl who was now about nineteen. But this young lady had been but little under the paternal roof for the last three or four years; for her father, feeling that he was unequal to superintend the education of a young girl who was beginning to advance rapidly towards womanhood, had accepted the offer of a sister, who had married a consular official at Munich, to take charge of his daughter, and give her all the educational advantages to be derived from a residence in that highly respectable if not very lively city. So Miss Eveline had lived almost entirely abroad for the last three years, with occasional visits to the old Wealdshire rectory, which were looked forward to with the greatest delight on both sides. By the next spring her education was to be considered complete, and

she was to return home for good, to be the joy of her father's house, and, as he fondly pictured to himself, the pride of the country-side. But these golden dreams were not destined to be realised, and her next journey home was for the purpose of attending her father's funeral.

But, dearly as he loved his daughter, the Rector, although in everyday life a practical and business-like man enough, had never set himself seriously to the consideration of what was to happen to her in the event of his own decease. Not that she was altogether unprovided for, as he had a small independence of his own, which he had secured upon her some years before. But nothing had been done beyond this; and whatever ideas may have passed through his mind as to the nomination of a guardian or trustee, they had assumed no definite shape; so that, as frequently happens, the hand of death came suddenly upon him, and found him unprepared as regards any definite arrangements for the future of his nearest and dearest. This was what had so distracted his mind in the intervals of consciousness that were allowed to him when

seized with what he felt to be a mortal illness. He had no near relations living, except the sister residing at Munich; and of all those few old friends who were left to him there was none whom he could call to mind whom he so thoroughly loved and trusted as his old pupil and patron, Lord Sydmonton. So when it became manifest to him that the shadow of death was approaching, and the vision of his orphan child rose up vividly before him, it was not unnatural that his thoughts should turn eagerly to Lord Sydmonton, as the one person to whom he would most readily intrust her, and that his anxiety to see him before he died should have been very great. Whether or not Lord Sydmonton hesitated before undertaking such an unwonted charge it is not necessary to inquire; but it was evident that he had not refused it, for although he returned to Sydmonton the next morning, it was only for the purpose of interviewing certain heads of his establishment and giving certain necessary orders. His lordship's valet was despatched to Lullingston the same afternoon with the requisite appliances for several days' absence from home; and his lordship

himself was back there in the evening, and took up his quarters at the little village inn, within a hundred yards of the Rectory gate.

It will readily be imagined that such an unprecedented event created no little excitement in the quiet little village; and the respectable old couple who kept the "French Horn" were so overcome by the undreamt-of honour of entertaining a real live lord viscount, that if it had not been for the exertions and adjurations of Mr. Thornton, his lordship's valet, that nobleman, although by no means difficult to please, might have fared somewhat indifferently. There, however, he remained; and when, on the third day after the Rector's death, a fly from the nearest station turned in at the Rectory gate, and a young lady in deep mourning, accompanied by a foreign-looking servant, alighted from the dingy vehicle, Lord Sydmonton was at the door to receive her.

It is not necessary to enter at length into the growth of the acquaintance between Lord Sydmonton and his fair charge, which, beginning in this unlooked-for fashion and under such melancholy circumstances, speedily de-

veloped into a deep interest on the one side, and a clinging, child-like affection on the other. Suffice it to say, that within three months of the Rector's death, and when the little world of Lullingston had become accustomed to the frequent visits of Lord Sydmonton, presumably on business matters, the whole neighbourhood was one morning electrified by a rumour which, starting from Sydmonton, flew through the countryside like wildfire, that his lordship and "Miss Evy" were going to be married.

The excitement that such a piece of intelligence was calculated to create will readily be imagined. Speculation and gossip were of course busy as to the causes which had led to such an unexpected step on Lord Sydmonton's part. Some shook their heads, and wished that no harm might come of such an unequal match. Others, some of whom might perhaps at one time have had designs upon his lordship themselves, "had always thought him very odd," and would not have been surprised at anything—were, in fact, rather inclined to be "sorry for her, poor girl!" while there were not wanting others who maintained that

his lordship had been the victim of a deep-laid plot between the rector, now slumbering peacefully in Lullingston Churchyard, and his designing daughter. But the majority were content with an expression of their opinion that she was a very lucky girl, and piously hoped that the sudden elevation might not turn her head.

Lord Sydmonton, however, was not a man to be much affected by the gossip and tattle of his neighbours, even if, which is extremely improbable, it ever reached his ears. That he was in earnest about it there could be no doubt; and about three months later, or within half a year of that bleak winter's day when the whole parish had turned out with one accord to follow the remains of their beloved "paa'son" to the grave, a quiet wedding took place in the grey, weather-stained old church under the downs, and Eveline Tudway became Viscountess Sydmonton. Although the known desire of both bride and bridegroom that there should be no outward display on the occasion was loyally respected, it was not in human nature that the feelings of the Lullingstonians should be altogether

repressed; and as Lord and Lady Sydmonton passed out of the church into the bright sunshine, with the jackdaws wheeling about the old belfry, and the long cloud-shadows stealing over the downs, a cheer broke forth from the crowd of rustics that had quietly assembled during the service, which showed that they were not indifferent either to the happiness of their old rector's daughter or to the reflected lustre that must shine upon Lullingston from such a noble alliance. And as the carriage with the Sydmonton liveries, which for the last half-hour had been a source of pleasurable awe to the Lullingston juveniles, drove rapidly through the village, there was hardly a cottage door or a garden gate that was not occupied by some stout matron or weather-beaten old man, anxious to give a God-speed to the bride whom they had known as a child, and who was now being carried off from them in a whirl of splendour that would be the talk of the village for many a long day to come.

Having thus got Lord Sydmonton married, we will not follow up the subject further than to record the fact that, although contracted under somewhat peculiar circumstances, there

never was a happier union. The noble Viscount was at this time about forty-eight, and his bride in her twentieth year. But although there were of course plenty of people who indulged in the usual friendly observations about his being old enough to be her father,—poor child, not knowing her own mind —dazzled by a coronet—and all the rest of it, —the disparity of years did not appear to occasion much disquietude to either of the principal persons concerned. It would never indeed have occurred to a casual observer that there was any very great disparity to talk about. For although Lord Sydmonton was unquestionably well past the morning of life, he looked at least ten years younger than he really was. His naturally vigorous constitution had not been impaired by late hours and dissipation; a healthy out-door life had developed and strengthened an unusually powerful frame; and there were few active pursuits in which, if he chose, he could not hold his own with most men of thirty.

There were some who said that after living a secluded bachelor life for so long, Lord Sydmonton would soon begin to find the ties

and obligations of matrimony rather irksome; but there were certainly no outward indications of anything of this sort. There was, of course, a certain awakening and brushing up at Sydmonton Place. The long-disused reception-rooms were opened, and put into the hands of a troupe of London upholsterers; the old family pictures emerged from their dusty coverings; satin, damask, and gilding usurped the place of brown holland and tissue paper; and a sunny room, looking to the south, and opening into the prettiest rose-garden imaginable, grew bright with chintzes, old china, water-colour drawings, and other decorations suitable for my lady's boudoir. But in other respects things went on much as usual. Lord Sydmonton was not a man to give up his old friends, and her ladyship showed no disposition to wean him from his bachelor habits. Sydmonton House, a grand but gloomy old mansion in Cavendish Square, had been let to the Spanish Legation for a term of years, of which several were still unexpired; and although it was necessary that Lady Sydmonton should be presented at court, and appear at a state ball and concert, and a few

other select entertainments, a month or so at Claridge's Hotel was found sufficient for such concessions to the requirements of society, and both my lord and my lady were only too delighted to get back to their beautiful country home. And although the circle of autumn guests was now somewhat enlarged, and new and younger faces might be seen in some of the bachelor rooms, while the rustle of ladies' dresses and the appearance of smart ladies'-maids in the long-deserted corridors upstairs showed that the visitors to Sydmonton were no longer exclusively of the sterner sex, the same old *habitués* were still to be found in the library and at the covert-side, and were perhaps treated with even more consideration than before.

CHAPTER X.

"MY LADY."

We have in the preceding chapter gone at such length into the previous history of the noble owner of Sydmonton, which, considering that after all he does not fill any very prominent position in our story, is perhaps a somewhat uncalled-for divergence, that we have as yet omitted any description either of that classic domain itself, or—a still more culpable piece of neglect—of its fair mistress.

Sydmonton Place, then, was one of those houses that depend more upon their outward surroundings and their internal comforts than upon any intrinsic merits in the way of architectural beauty. It was, in fact, though in some parts very old, of no particular order of architecture, and Tudor stonework, Elizabethan mullions, and Queen Anne red-brick were jumbled together in a manner calculated to outrage the feelings of an æsthetic

student of Mazois or Pugin. But it was a thoroughly comfortable and *livable* house; and although, from having been so long "in commission," the principal apartments presented rather a bare and formal aspect, it needed but the magic touch of a lady's hand, a little judicious "making hay" here and there, backed by *carte blanche* in the matter of minor decorations, to render the old house a happy combination of old-fashioned comfort and modern elegance.

But it is out of doors that the peculiar attractions of Sydmonton Place must be sought. Approaching by the principal entrance, the visitor passes through an unpretending iron gateway, flanked by a pretty little lodge, into what appears to be an immense forest, along a sandy carriage-drive, where the clack of horses' hoofs and the rumble of carriage-wheels are alike deadened, and where not a sound is to be heard but the gentle sighing of the wind through the tree-tops, the occasional scream of a jay, or the rustle through the fern of a startled hare or rabbit. On one side a bank of noble Scotch firs rises up, so as to completely intercept any further view, while on

the other a steep declivity reveals an undulating mass of copse wood, principally birch and hazel, intermingled with hollies and rhododendrons, and here and there a clump of stately beeches, or dark spruces, rising against the sky line, and forming a prominent landmark in the sea of variegated autumn colouring. For the fall of the year is the time to see Sydmonton in all its beauty; and it would then be difficult to find a lovelier spot throughout the south of England. After about a mile and a half of this beautiful woodland scenery, the road is barred by another gate and lodge, opening into a widespreading deer-park, broken up by heathery knolls and groups of Scotch firs. And now an unbroken view presents itself, both of the park and the surrounding country. On one side the heather and bracken of the deer-park slope down to a hollow where the glistening of water indicates one of those little trout-streams that are to be found in almost every valley in this part of Wealdshire, beyond which an irregular mass of wood stretches away into the open country. On the other side the road winds along the higher ground towards a battlemented arch-

way in the distance; while far away the quiet landscape of copse and hop-garden gradually melts away into the undulating slope of the Southdowns, and, beyond all, the bold outline of Ramsey Head descends abruptly into the blue waters of the English Channel. Following the line indicated by the little stream in the hollow, the eye catches the first glimpse of the house, which, lying perhaps rather too low, is as yet only partially discernible through a screen of stately timber and luxurious masses of evergreens.

But pleasing as the prospect is at all times, it was none the less so, on a certain late autumn or rather early winter afternoon at the time of which we are speaking, for the addition of an animated foreground in the shape of a pretty George IV. phaeton, with a pair of smart cobs, which had just pulled up on the rising ground about half-way through the deer-park. The only occupant of the carriage, with the exception of a dapper little groom who had just run to the ponies' heads, was a lady, whom a casual passer-by might have put down at from five-and-twenty to thirty, and to whom a close observer might

possibly have accorded another four or five years. But few would have guessed that Lady Sydmonton had now been married for nearly twenty years, which, knowing as we do that at the time of her marriage she was in her twentieth year, would have brought her very close upon forty. Tall and graceful, with glossy chestnut hair and a complexion that, from having once been of a dazzling clearness, had been deepened by fearless exposure to all weathers to a rich olive tint, she looked the embodiment of health and vigour; and as she leaned forward in the carriage, with an animated expression, to speak to a white-haired but sturdy-looking old man who, hat in hand and with a pair of spaniels at his heels, was hastening across the grass to meet her, a prettier picture of English country life could hardly have been imagined.

"Well, Stephen," she exclaimed, as the old man drew near, "what have you done with his lordship? I was to meet him at Speed Gate at three o'clock, and it's now nearly four, and I have been driving backwards and forwards till the ponies have got so excited I can hardly hold them. Come, put your hat on,

or you'll catch cold. Where is his lordship now?"

"Well, my lady," replied the old man, in his slip-shod Wealdshire dialect, as he lifted his eyes to her face with a glow of pleasure on his weather-beaten features, "my lord be at Coppice Pool by dis time, he be. Us worked through Bishop's Wood and Hog Shaw, and den dere were a lot o' birds went right away over to Coppice. So my lord he say he and Muster Smith dey go up to d' Pool, and d' beaters dey come round by Clover Ha'atch, and bring d' whole right up to he. And my lord he says to me, 'You go across to Speed Gate,' says he, 'an' tell my lady not to wait, as I shall be an hour later now,' says he, 'an' I'll walk home.'"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said her ladyship, gently smoothing down the silky coat of the pony on the off-side with the crop of her whip, "then I think I'd better go home too, when I've given these ponies a good turn. Well, Stephen, how are the pheasants? You know there are some gentlemen coming to shoot in a day or two, and I think his lordship means to shoot Ten-acre Gyll, and some of those woods at Oakhurst."

"Well, my lady," rejoined the old keeper, "there be a tidy lot o' birds in Ten-acre Gyll, and dey should be coming well into Fox Earth and dey woods up at Oakhurst. And dey be uncommon well growed too, dey be; some o' dey young cocks my lord killed dis mornin' you couldn't hardly tell from d' old ones. But d' covers be terr'ble thick this year, and we'll have a rare job to get dey birds up. Daresay we shan't see half on 'em, my lady."

"Any ducks or teal in the petts?" * inquired her ladyship, disregarding the old gentleman's slight tendency to croak.

"Should be a few now, my lady. Harn't seen none this last week or so; but young Tom Billett he come up by Middle Pett night afore last, and he see two lots of teal going over d' wood. 'Bout time dey was in now, some of 'em."

"By the way, how's Adam Billett now?" asked her ladyship; "I've heard nothing of him for the last few days. Is his arm all right again?"

Adam Billett was the head forester at

* A Wealdshire term for a pool or pit of water surrounded by trees or bushes.

Sydmonton, who, either through carelessness or over-confidence, had injured his arm while cutting down a tree a short time before.

"Oh, Adam be nicely, thanky'e, my lady," replied Stephen, with a touch of his hat. "He were up at Woodcock Hill yesterday, with his arm in a sling, and doctor he say he'll be all right again in a few days. Adam he be terr'ble glad to get about again; he don't like stopping at home nohow."

"Come, I'm very glad to hear that," said Lady Sydmonton, "I was afraid it might be a longer affair. Your grandson's getting quite a big lad, Stephen. I saw him down at the house this morning, and he's quite grown out of his clothes. Is he still minding the pigs, Stephen, or has Mr. Smith found him something else to do?"

"No, my lady, he be still along o' dey pigs, and dey do take to he uncommon like. Muster Smith he say dey never done so well afore."

"Well," replied her ladyship, gathering up her reins, and smiling at the idea of the good understanding said to prevail between the youth in question and the pigs, "if he's doing well with the pigs, I suppose he had better

stop there for the present. Now I must be off, or his lordship will be home before I am. Good-bye, Stephen. All right, Sam." And off she drove, leaving the old keeper looking after her with every expression of approval.

"Ah! she's a right good sort; God bless her," he murmured to himself. "Come back, Kate, what are ye up to now?" to one of the spaniels, who showed an inclination to frolic after the carriage. And lighting his pipe, he wended his way leisurely to his cottage on the other side of the deer-park.

Few persons well acquainted with Lady Sydmonton would have hesitated to heartily endorse the encomium passed upon her by the old keeper, who had passed his whole life in the service of the Sydmonton family, and who, although at first inclined, with the jealousy of an old retainer, to look with disfavour upon his master's marriage, had in a very short time been completely won over by a charm of manner that was quite irresistible, and a sweetness of disposition which, coupled with an unmistakable devotion to her husband, soon found its way to the hearts of every one about the place. From the great

Mr. Smith, his lordship's agent—great in every sense of the word, for he stood a good sixteen stone in his long Wealdshire gaiters—down to the young gentleman lately referred to as the successful custodian of the pigs at the home farm, there was not a man or boy on the estate who, if asked for an opinion on the subject, would not have unhesitatingly pronounced her to be his ideal of feminine perfection. Not that he would have expressed himself in these identical words, for Wealdshire is not as a rule given to flowery or sentimental language; but he would have hitched up his gaiters with a determination that words would utterly fail to express, and would have grinned his approval in a manner more convincing than any amount of mere verbal eloquence. And there was indeed some justification for the good opinion in which Lady Sydmonton was held; for she had from the first set herself to become thoroughly acquainted, not only with every detail of her husband's property in which she could be of the slightest use to him, but with the personal history and interests of every cottager on the estate. She set about it, too,

in such a quiet and unpretentious yet at the same time thoroughly business-like manner, that the Sydmonton rustics soon began to see that she was really in earnest, and that she meant to throw herself heart and soul into everything connected with the place. But what perhaps won their hearts and excited their admiration more than anything else, was her evident devotion to her husband. She rode with him, drove with him, walked with him out shooting, and entered into his varied out-door pursuits with almost as much keenness as himself; while indoors she acted as his secretary and amanuensis, and astonished Mr. Smith by her acquaintance with the business details of the property. And while a different atmosphere pervaded the old house, and the presence of a lady was easily discernible, she took the greatest care that he should not be called upon to give up any of his bachelor habits; and although some of the old *habitués* of Sydmonton had at first shaken their heads, and prophesied that the freedom and independence of the good old bachelor times had gone for ever, there was not one of them who, within a year of Lady Sydmonton's

marriage, was not ready to swear that there never was such a woman as her ladyship, and that, after all, things were very much the same under the new *régime* as they had been before.

On the whole, therefore, it would have been difficult to find a more devoted or better-assorted couple than Viscount and Viscountess Sydmonton; and there was but one element wanting in their cup of happiness to make it full to overflowing. No children had ever blessed their union; and although there were roomy nurseries in a secluded wing of the house that could easily have accommodated a whole infant school, there was no patter of little feet along the oaken floors, and no echo of childish laughter rang through the spacious corridors. The want of an heir had at first been a source of bitter disappointment both to Lord and Lady Sydmonton; and there were times when this feeling would return upon them very strongly. But they had by degrees become so wrapt up in and so used to each other's society that this void in their lives was perhaps less keenly felt by them than their friends imagined.

But our regard for Sydmonton and its inmates has already caused us to devote an altogether disproportionate amount of space to their introduction to the reader; and we hasten, therefore, to resume the thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER XI.

HOLIDAY TIME.

INDEPENDENCE is a pleasant thing at all times; and there can be no doubt that the man is much to be envied who, being endowed by nature with a healthy taste for out-door sports, is in a position that enables him to thoroughly enjoy and make the most of those long winter months which to so many are suggestive only of dreariness and discomfort, and to some simply mean either a species of hybernation indoors, or an enforced exile from their native country. But to none does the close of the year bring keener enjoyment, in a small way, than to the sportsman who is tied down for the greater part of the year by some fixed occupation, but who contrives to obtain an occasional holiday during the autumn and winter for indulgence in his favourite pastime. With what care and circumspection he makes all his preliminary arrangements! Guns are

minutely overhauled, cartridges are carefully loaded, and cartridge-bags re-fitted or re-sewn; while there is even an interest in examining his shooting-boots, and speculating whether those old ones will hold together for the whole of his trip, or whether he ought not to afford himself a new pair. And how anxiously he watches the weather, and studies every variation of the barometer and every Transatlantic prophecy! Should he be so fortunate as to be able to look forward to a fortnight or three weeks' hunting, his pleasurable anticipations are tempered by even graver anxieties. Fancy if it were to freeze hard the whole time! or if that young horse, respecting whose performances he has indulged in such agreeable dreams during the summer, should turn out a failure after all! But even allowing for any little incidental and unavoidable misgivings, an expedition to the country, with the prospect of a week's good shooting, offers about as pleasant a change for a Londoner of sporting proclivities, but tied more or less by circumstances to a sedentary occupation, as it is possible to imagine. And as Gerard Courtenay hailed a hansom one

dull afternoon early in November, and gave the word for Victoria Station, he felt as if he had got the whole world before him. He had had a good deal of work lately; for although the business of the General Enquiry Office was not usually of such pressing importance as to require the regular attendance of the Vice-President after the session was over, a practice had grown up, on this very account, of turning that functionary into a species of man-of-all-work, and of intrusting him with any odd jobs that could not strictly be said to be connected with any one department more than another. And certain delicate questions having arisen in connection with some commercial treaties, which involved some research among the records of the General Enquiry Office, the occasion was eagerly seized upon by those members of the Government who were perhaps more directly responsible for the conduct of the negotiations, but who happened to have urgent private affairs that called them away to the country, to suggest that it would be a good opportunity for Lord Ravendale, especially as he would be at Newmarket during September and October, and consequently

within easy reach of London, to make himself acquainted with this important question, and at the same time give the Government and the nation the benefit of his valuable opinion on the subject. And as Lord Ravendale, although, as we have hinted, not a man who was disposed to seek out or invent work for its own sake, was by no means disinclined to tackle a question when it came in his way, he readily consented to have his headquarters in London during the intervals of the Newmarket autumn meetings, and to exercise a general superintendence over the weighty matters in question. Gerard, as in duty bound, remained in attendance on his chief; so that, although he had occasionally been able to get away for a few days at a time, and had had no reason to complain of real over-work, he had not as yet had any regular holiday, and was prepared therefore to enjoy a week's covert-shooting at Sydmonton with the comfortable satisfaction of having honestly earned it. His acquaintance with the Sydmontons was of some standing, his father and Lord Sydmonton having been friends when in the diplomatic service. Gerard had

been at Sydmonton with his father when quite a child, and had been kindly noticed by Lord Sydmonton, who had asked him down to shoot more than once since he had arrived at man's estate. So he well knew what a pleasant week was likely to be in store for him, and started in the highest spirits.

On such occasions, a railway journey, if not too long, loses a good deal of its usual tediousness, and constitutes, in fact, a not unpleasant item in one's holiday programme. Gerard was quite in a disposition to make the best of everything, and having encumbered himself with a shillingsworth of newspapers and periodicals, proceeded to establish himself with great complacency in a smoking carriage, along with a couple of elderly gentlemen, armed with a neatly-skewered little fish-basket apiece, who presented all the appearance of well-to-do citizens on the way to rejoin their families at the sea-side or in the country.

Having settled himself comfortably in a corner, Gerard proceeded to unfold his newspapers and apply himself with much deliberation to a study of their contents. But the already waning light was not favourable to his

well-intentioned endeavours in this direction, and he soon took to looking out of the window. For a time he amused himself by scanning the fences as they met him in rapid succession, and thinking where he would like to "have" them. Then his thoughts diverged into the shooting line, as he watched the hares and pheasants moving about outside the woods, and wondered who there would be at Sydmonton, and what coverts were going to be shot. Wondered also whether he would be able to shoot straight, and inwardly hoped that some rather doubtful cartridges he had kept over from last year would be all right, and not miss fire. By degrees the grey sky became darker, till it merged into a dull red line on the horizon, and the landscape resolved itself into a blurred mass of light and shade. His two companions, having concluded a learned discussion on the aspects of the indigo trade, were slumbering peacefully beneath the shadow of their respective fish-baskets in the netting above them, and Gerard himself began to feel a pleasant sensation of drowsiness stealing over him, which he had no particular inclination to resist. Just, however, as he

was beginning to dream of Sydmonton, and was in fancy struggling through a thick cover with pheasants coming back over his head in clouds, while his gun had to his horror turned into something resembling a fire-shovel, and utterly refused to go off, a prolonged scream from the engine and a gradual slackening of pace awoke him to consciousness, and announced that they were approaching a station of some importance; and looking first at his watch, and then out of the window, Gerard realised the fact that they were nearing Corsham, where the express part of his journey ended, and whence the remainder was to be continued on a little branch line for about fifteen miles further. Here, too, his fellow-travellers began to wake up and collect their *impedimenta*, with the obvious intention of disembarking, and in another moment the train drew up at the station.

"Corsham! Corsham! change for Crowhurst and Lingfield!" now resounded along the platform. Having, however, ascertained that his carriage was a "through" one, and would be shunted on to the branch line, Gerard was able to take matters coolly, and having got

rid of his fellow-passengers, proceeded to lean his arms upon the window-sill, and contemplate the mixed assemblage of waiting travellers — farmers, smock-frocked labourers and their womankind, and miscellaneous "loafers" —that is always to be seen at any important junction in a rural district, especially if it happens to be market-day there or somewhere else along the line. Just as the scrimmage and confusion were at their height, a luggage-laden barrow, followed by a personage whose importance had evidently made a certain impression upon the railway officials, forced its way through the crowd, and a voice was heard insisting in peremptory tones that its owner should be forthwith directed to the train for Penhurst, the station to which Gerard was himself bound. Attracted by the mention of the name, Gerard directed his attention to the speaker, in whom he was not long in recognising our old friend the "Cadger," or rather, to give him his full style and titles, Augustus, fourth Earl of Ballybrack, in the peerage of Ireland. The nobleman in question, who had apparently met with some difficulties in the prosecution of his journey, was evidently in a

great fuss, and expressed his opinion of the railway company, its officials, and general arrangements, in the most emphatic manner.

"Where's that fool of a porter? Oh, there you are! Now then, where the devil is this infernal train? I've been waiting this last three-quarters of an hour. Not up yet? Then what on earth did you bring me out here for, you infernal idiot? Through carriage from London? Then why the devil didn't you say so before?"

So, with a running commentary of anathemas, his lordship was brought up to Gerard's carriage door, and there deposited, together with an infinity of rugs, dressing-cases, handbags, and other paraphernalia essential to the dignity of a nobleman of his degree, which were handed in after him by an active domestic, whose imperturbable face and manner showed that he was well used to these little ebullitions on his master's part. Having comfortably established himself, and been nicely tucked up by his servant, he turned his attention to Gerard, now the only other occupant of the carriage. Gerard and he had met at the General Enquiry Office, where he was in

the habit of paying an occasional visit, for the purpose, as he was wont to explain, of "getting a straight tip out of old Tommy, you know;" and when that statesman, who was, perhaps, not always as anxious for an interview as his visitor, was otherwise engaged, would make himself at home in the private secretary's room, and give Gerard the benefit of his opinion on things in general.

"Hallo, Courtenay! so it is. By Jove, I'm very glad to see you. Where are you going? Sydmonton? Dash it, so am I, we'll go together, eh? Good chap, old Sydmonton; got a devilish good cook; and I'll tell you what," in a confidential whisper, "Lady Sydmonton's a devilish handsome woman. Nice little shoot, too—not very many pheasants, but all devilish well done, and generally some woodcocks. Oh, Sydmonton ain't half a bad place, I tell you. Thank goodness, we're off at last! I've been at this d——d station nearly an hour. Came across from Ratton; been staying with the Seymours; devilish nice party there too, and lots of shooting; but, somehow or other, I assure you, my dear fellow, I couldn't hit a d——d thing. Expect

we sat up too late at night, too much 'nap' in the smoking-room, and all that sort of thing. None of that at Sydmonton, eh? Early hours there; old boy won't stand any nonsense, and quite right too. Hang it! I feel as if I hadn't slept for a week." And, rattling on in this style, his lordship, who, to do him justice, certainly presented a somewhat feverish and dissipated appearance, proceeded to stretch out his legs, and leaning back in his corner, was soon doing his best to make up for that cruel deprivation of his slumbers from which he had represented himself as lately suffering. But his rest, though apparently sound, was not destined to last long; for another half hour brought them to the little roadside station of Penhurst, where, however, it required all the eloquence of the stationmaster and the confirmatory evidence of his lordship's servant to make him believe that he had arrived at his destination, and that it had become necessary for him to alight. The Sydmonton omnibus was waiting, and in another hour or so our travellers were sitting down to dinner with a cheery party in the old panelled dining-room of Sydmonton Place.

CHAPTER XII.

A COUNTRY-HOUSE BREAKFAST.

THERE are few pleasanter sensations than that of awaking on a fine morning with the consciousness that something agreeable is going to happen, which for the moment our partially awakened faculties are unable to altogether realise, but which by degrees resolves itself into a definite shape, until the link is complete with our last thoughts overnight. Gerard Courtenay, awakened out of a sound sleep, on the morning after his arrival at Sydmonton, by the opening of his bedroom shutters and the bustling about of the footman told off to attend upon him, had for a few seconds, although conscious of a pleasant sort of holiday sensation, some difficulty in making out exactly where he was, until, catching sight of his shooting things being laid out on a chair, he suddenly realised the fact that he was at Sydmonton, with every prospect of a

good week's shooting before him. His first impulse, when his attendant had left the room, having informed him that it was eight o'clock, that prayers were at a quarter-past nine, and breakfast at half-past, was to spring out of bed and look out of the window. It was a still, grey morning; the mist was rising from the lake in a hollow about a quarter of a mile from the house; the deer were slowly moving across the open; a vast army of rooks were cawing melodiously on their way from the hill behind the house to their feeding-grounds in distant fields; and everything, in fact, betokened a fine winter's day. Feeling, however, a little chilly about the legs, Gerard somewhat ignominiously retired to bed again, to contemplate the situation in the most thoroughly luxurious manner. While he was reckoning up the number of guns, and wondering whether he would get a good place in the Forge Wood, which rumour had indicated on the previous evening as one of the probable beats for the day, his meditations, which were rapidly drifting into a doze, were disturbed by another knock at his door, and the appearance of no less a person than the great Mr

Thornton, who has been referred to before as Lord Sydmonton's valet, but who had now been advanced to the dignity of house-steward. He was a most excellent and faithful servant; but having been now some five-and-thirty years in his lordship's service, he considered himself as quite one of the family; and while never in the smallest degree wanting in respect or disposed to forget his place, he was wont to exercise a sort of benign patronage over any new visitors to Sydmonton, particularly the younger ones, whom he thought might be the better for the weight of his experience and knowledge of the world. For some reason or other he had taken a special fancy to Gerard, whom he thought a well-behaved and promising young gentleman — quite the sort of visitor, in fact, whom he liked to see at Sydmonton; so he kept a paternal eye upon him, and was careful to see that he was well looked after.

"Hollo! Thornton, is that you?" exclaimed Gerard, sitting up in bed; "I say, I haven't gone and overslept myself, have I? What o'clock is it?"

"Oh no, sir," replied the great man, looking

at his watch, "you've got plenty of time, sir; but as I was passing this way, I thought I'd just look in and see if you had got all you wanted, sir. I hope Robert is attending you properly, sir; he is a new footman, and I don't know whether he has had much experience in valeting yet."

"Oh, many thanks, Thornton," replied Gerard; "I've no doubt I shall be all right; he seems to have put everything out for me; and anyhow, I can ring if I want anything more. By the way, Thornton, do you know where we're going to-day? I thought I heard something about Forge Wood last night, but I didn't quite like to ask his lordship point blank, you know."

"Yes, sir," returned Mr Thornton, who considered himself a profound authority on sporting matters, and was always in the confidence of the head keeper on these subjects, if not invariably in his master's, "his lordship proposes to shoot Forge Wood after luncheon; but there will be a good deal to do before that, sir. You will begin at Potter's Corner, and come round by Malthouse and Fox Earth, which I think you know, sir; and then, if

there is time, I think his lordship will very likely take the whole of Forge Wood down to Speed Gate."

"By Jove, Thornton!" exclaimed Gerard, "we ought to have a rare day, then; and if the wind's right, and we get those rocketers coming over from Fox Earth, we shall have capital fun. How about the pheasants, Thornton? I suppose old Stephen's got a good lot up there?"

"Oh, yes, sir," rejoined the major-domo, with the confident air of a man who was thoroughly behind the scenes, "you will find plenty of birds. I've been round there myself two or three times, and the wild pheasants have done remarkably well this year. Of course there are not so many tame birds in those woods as in some of those nearer the house; but you will have a good day's sport, sir, you may depend upon it. The beaters have just started, sir, as they have three miles to walk to Potter's Corner. You will see them going across the park directly."

"By Jove! I must be getting up, Thornton," exclaimed Gerard. "Why, it's just nine! I suppose we shall drive, shan't we?"

"Oh, yes, sir," replied Mr Thornton, now preparing to depart, "the waggonette is ordered at a quarter-past ten, sir." And with a stately bow the great man took himself off, leaving Gerard to the completion of his toilet.

There are few social institutions respecting which there is a greater divergence of opinion than that of breakfast, not only as regards its component parts, but as regards the hour and place of the meal, and the conditions under which it should be eaten. Some persons are disposed to look upon it as the most important gastronomic event of the day, being blessed with appetites, which as a rule they are pleased to attribute to good consciences, that can only be satisfied by the consumption of large quantities of solid food, from the very thought of which many would turn away in horror, being themselves quite satisfied with a cup of tea or coffee and a slice or two of dry toast. Some, again, look with favour on the Continental system, and, after their early tea or coffee on rising, will keep their appetites in check till the middle of the day. Then as to the locality and status of the repast. There are many who hold that it should be eaten in solitude, and

maintain that the interruptions of conversation are incompatible with digestion and the state of mind and nerves necessary for grappling with the morning's letters. But, on the whole, we suspect that the balance of opinion inclines towards making it a social meal; and there can be no doubt that, putting aside the case of an invalid or a hypochondriac, there is much to be said for it from this point of view. And a country-house breakfast, especially when there is any sport going on, is usually a cheery affair enough. The visitors are greeted with inquiries as to how they have slept; the old gentlemen, generally the first in the field, pay pretty compliments to the young ladies on their appearance, and, as a reward, get well taken care of in the matter of tea, coffee, and creature comforts generally; the younger ones saunter in last of all, and get chaffed about sitting up too late and spoiling their complexions; the plans for the day are discussed, and everything progresses merrily.

Breakfast at Sydmonton was decidedly a repast of the social order; and when Gerard came down rather late, and consequently rather ashamed of himself, he found a cheerful party

already assembled. At the head of the table sat Lady Sydmonton, brightest and freshest of all, presiding gracefully over an assemblage of tea-cups; for, unlike many hostesses, who are content to leave their guests to the tender mercies of the servants, she made a point of looking after their comfort herself, at breakfast as well as on other occasions. On her ladyship's right sat that well-preserved courtier and diplomatist, the Marquis de Camisolles, got up for the "chasse" with the utmost precision, from a many-buttoned and many-pocketed Norfolk jacket down to a pair of long and highly-varnished boots, who, in the intervals of a most substantial breakfast, was devoting himself with the utmost gallantry and many well-turned compliments to his fair hostess. Scattered up and down the table were a party of some twelve or fourteen, and the cheerful hum of conversation, blended with the ring of merry laughter, pervaded the whole room. A couple of fresh-looking elderly gentlemen, evidently *habitués* of the house, were making themselves very agreeable to two handsome sisters, who, attired alike in dark, well-fitting serge dresses, relieved here and there by a

knot of bright-coloured ribbon, looked as fresh and charming as only Englishwomen can look at such an early hour in the morning. On the opposite side of the table, a studious-looking party in spectacles, to whom the celebrated library of Sydmonton Place might be suspected of offering greater attractions than its resources in the way of field-sports, was apparently imparting some profound scientific information to a fair-haired lady, perhaps not quite in her first youth, but who might well be pronounced "dangerous" by her own sex; and further down sat the stately and well-developed Lady Chetwynd, mother of the two young ladies opposite, whose healthy appetite was being ministered to by a smart young guardsman, who was evidently in her ladyship's good graces, and towards whom an occasional and not unfriendly glance was directed by his fair neighbours opposite. At the foot of the table sat Lord Sydmonton himself, as fine a specimen of a somewhat old-fashioned English gentleman as it would be possible to find. His lordship was now getting on for seventy, but few would have credited him with being within fifteen years of that age. His dark, closely-

cropped hair showed but few silvery lines here and there, and though advancing years had whitened the edges of a pointed Vandyke beard and moustache, and traced deepening lines on the massive brow, there was little else to denote that he had long passed that mysterious and undefinable period usually known as middle age. The tall, powerful frame seemed as upright and vigorous as ever; there were no signs of decrepitude about the firm, muscular tread, and though perhaps not so energetic after the partridges in the long days of September as in former years, he could still hold his own with most men in a rough winter's walk through brier and stubble, while at a rocketing pheasant or rapidly-darting woodcock he was, if anything, even more deadly than before. On the present occasion it was evident that the cares of the coming "chasse" were rather weighing on his mind, and although doing the honours to Lady Chetwynd with a courtly, old-fashioned grace peculiarly his own, his frequent glances at his watch and at the one or two places still remaining vacant at the breakfast-table, showed that he was not altogether sanguine as to the

certainty of his party being mustered in time for a punctual start.

Gerard entered the room rather sheepishly, conscious that he had no business to be down so late, and not feeling quite equal to meeting the reproachful eye of his host, made his way straight to Lady Sydmonton, with many apologies for his lateness. Her ladyship, however, was most reassuring. "Oh, indeed, Mr Courtenay, you're not by any means the last. There's still Lord Ballybrack to come, and some one else too, I think, isn't there? There's plenty of time, I assure you; only you had better set to work at once and not talk. Tea or coffee? You will find coffee on the sideboard, and there are some hot things down by the fire." So Gerard slipped quietly into a vacant place by the side of one of the Miss Chetwynds, who smilingly made room for him, and proceeded to apply himself with diligence to his breakfast.

But the clock on the mantelpiece is chiming ten, and his lordship, unable to restrain himself any longer, draws his cord breeches from underneath the table, and inquires of the Marquis whether he can be ready in a quarter

of an hour. At this sufficiently broad hint Lady Sydmonton looks round on the other ladies, who have for some time been playing with their knives or looking at their letters, and amidst a general uprising and rustling of dresses, mingled with wishes for good sport and anxious speculations respecting the "Cadger," who has not yet put in an appearance, marshals her following out of the room, and leaves the gentlemen to her lord and master. Greatly to that nobleman's relief, a servant at this moment enters and informs him that Lord Ballybrack has been having his breakfast in his own room, and will be ready to start whenever his lordship wishes. "Oh, come then, we shall do," ejaculates his lordship thankfully. "Marquis, I see you have finished your breakfast. Courtenay, you can have five minutes more, but you must look sharp about it. Then, gentlemen, we will meet in the west entrance at the quarter past, or say in twenty minutes from now; and please be punctual, if possible, for we have three miles to drive, and a good day's work before us."

Thus adjured, the Marquis and the other sportsmen, who have finished their breakfast,

disperse in various directions, and Gerard, now left the sole occupant of the dining-room, applies himself with the utmost energy to make the most of the five minutes allowed him, so that the stable clock has scarcely chimed a quarter-past ten before hob-nailed boots are heard converging along the stone floors in the direction of the west entrance, and Lord Sydmonton, emerging from the green baize door leading to his private apartments, is gratified to find that the whole of his party are assembled, not even excepting the "Cadger," who, attended to the last by his faithful body-servant, and deeply absorbed in the adjustment in his button-hole of a particularly neat little bouquet, is quite indifferent to the chaff showered upon him in reference to his non-appearance at breakfast.

"Now, Marquis, will you sit by me, or will you get inside? Now, gentlemen, we've got no time to lose. The guns are all gone on, and we've only got ourselves to look after. Thornton, be sure that the luncheon is at Mitchell's house at half-past one, and let her ladyship know before the cart starts, in case she has any message."

And everything being now ready for a start, his lordship takes hold of his reins, and mounts to the box, where the Marquis has already installed himself behind a large cigar. "All right, Thomas!" and away they bowl down the smooth gravel of the approach.

Much has been said and written against the modern practice of battue-shooting; and a good deal of angry controversy has been excited on the subject during the last few years. But, as is frequently the case, those persons who are loudest and most violent in their denunciations of a system are not invariably the most qualified, either by their own experience or by any searching inquiries into the matter, to express an unprejudiced opinion thereon. It would probably be found, by any one who took the trouble to inquire, that nine-tenths of these gentlemen had never had the slightest personal experience of the demoralising practice against which they so eloquently inveigh, and in many cases had never gone the length of having a gun in their hands. The case against the lovers and promoters of battue-shooting is therefore not quite so strong as might at first be imagined.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that the practice has been grossly abused, and that what should and may be a manly and invigorating sport has in many cases degenerated into an effeminate and senseless slaughter. But because one man is not happy unless by the aids of artificial rearing and an army of keepers, watchers, and beaters he can enable his friends to kill a thousand pheasants on two or three days during the shooting season, it does not necessarily follow that another man is a butcher and wanting in all the qualifications of a sportsman because he employs exactly the same means, on a smaller scale, to kill a tenth or twentieth part of the number. Yet, if the denouncers of battue-shooting in the abstract were really consistent, and really understood what they were talking about, they would feel bound to include the two classes of sportsmen in the same category; for the term "battue" may be used in the case of a bag of fifteen or twenty head of game with as much correctness as in the case of one of fifteen hundred or two thousand.

We have no intention, however, of writing a treatise on the vexed question of battue-

shooting, which has nothing whatever to do with our story; and will lose no time, therefore, in following our party of sportsmen to Potter's Corner, where the beaters are already assembled to meet them, and where we may hope to see the beginning of a good sporting day, unmarked by any of that butchery which has invoked the ire of the well-intentioned but imperfectly-informed gentlemen to whom we have ventured to allude.

CHAPTER XIII.

POTTER'S CORNER.

Not the least among the many quiet charms of Wealdshire scenery are the extent and variety of its woodlands. Owing probably to the poor character of the soil, agriculture has never been prosecuted with any very great success; and high farming, except on some of the sunny slopes towards the sea, is almost unknown. In many parts, indeed, the original forest remains much as it must have been in the days of the Saxons, only broken up here and there by clearings in the form of irregularly-shaped fields and hop-gardens surrounding the little homesteads whose high red-tiled roofs nestle snugly in the sheltered hollows. But although from a practical point of view this primitive state of things may be altogether wrong, and quite unsuited to the present age, the general effect is decidedly

pleasing to the eye, and affords a delightful contrast to the monotony of those highly-cultivated districts where science has superseded nature, and every square inch of soil is utilised to the very utmost.

Potter's Corner was a little level green or "haugh," as it would be called in Scotland, in a hollow between two wooded glens, divided by a lane, across which ran a little stream, fordable for horses and carriages, and with a narrow plank bridge for foot-passengers. The remains of an old water-mill were still to be seen, though the mill-dam was now overgrown and almost dry. It was a quiet, secluded spot enough in general, but on the present occasion it presented unusual signs of life in the shape of some half-dozen velveteen-clad keepers and watchers, each with a retriever at his heels, and an array of canvas-frocked leather-leggined beaters in the background. As the waggonette was espied coming down the lane, a bustle of expectancy pervaded the group. Pipes were pocketed, thick hedging gloves pulled on, and all came to "attention," while one or two of the younger and more volatile dogs broke away from their masters,

and danced up the hill to meet the carriage in a state of the wildest excitement.

"Good morning, Jonas!" cried his lordship, throwing the reins on the horses' backs, and addressing the head keeper, a fine, weather-beaten man with a dark, gipsy-like complexion. "Well, it looks like a fine day, doesn't it? Morning, Ralph; morning, Mitchell," looking pleasantly round, and responding to the respectful salutations on all sides.

"Yes, my lord," replied the keeper with a pleased expression on his handsome face, "I think the day's well enough. I suppose your lordship will begin here? I've got a stop up at Hog Shaw, but I don't think there's much in it, and it will take some time."

"Oh no, never mind about Hog Shaw," replied his lordship; "we shall have as much as we can get through without that. Now, Jonas, will you send on guns at once to the end, or should they go to the pond first?"

"Oh, the end, I think, my lord. The birds are most likely to go forward. We've put a covey o' partridges in from that 'ratton,' * and they'll likely get up at once. But there'll

* Wealdshire for stubble.

be a few birds break away at the pond, no doubt."

"Very well, then," replied Lord Sydmonton. "Here, Stephen, you take the Marquis on to the end at once, and put Mr Bickersteth," indicating one of the old Sydmonton *habitués*, "at the pond. You know where to stand, Bickersteth, and you'll very likely get some of those partridges over you. Ballybrack," turning to that nobleman, "you come with me along the bottom, and you two young fellows," nodding to Gerard and the guardsman, "get inside, and go along with the beaters. You'll get some rabbits in there, and there will be sure to be some pheasants come back over your heads; so you must look out sharp. Now, Jonas, are we all ready?"

"Yes, my lord," responded Jonas with alacrity, "we're all right now, I think. Now, men, get into line!" And the well-drilled beaters proceed to deploy to the right and left, some making for the top of the bank, and the others dividing themselves along the bottom, while the Marquis and Mr Bickersteth, having got their guns and cartridges, strike off across the open, under the pilotage of old Stephen,

to take up their respective positions, followed at a little distance by Lord Sydmonton and the "Cadger," the other two guns remaining with the line of beaters.

"We must give the guns five minutes to get on, sir," said Jonas to Gerard, with a touch of his hat. Gerard was rather a favourite with Mr Jonas, who liked his keenness, and knew that he could not only be depended upon as a fair shot, but would go cheerfully wherever he was told. He was always glad, therefore, to see him at Sydmonton, and to show him all the sport in his power.

"All right, Jonas," replied Gerard, "we won't hurry 'em. How have you been getting on since I last saw you, Jonas? I suppose you've had a good breeding season this year, with all this fine weather?"

"Oh, well, sir, we've not done so badly," admitted the keeper; "there's a tidy lot of birds about, and pretty well grown too, most of 'em. There should be some on this bank this morning, sir; we generally find them here this time o' day, when the sun's on it as it is now. Ah, I see his lordship at the corner. I think we can move on slowly

now, sir. Perhaps you'd better keep along the bottom, sir, and the other gentleman," touching his hat to the guardsman, "might go a bit higher up the bank. That'll do, sir. Now, beaters, forward steadily!"

And the whole line gets into motion, the great Mr Jonas in the centre, one or two subordinate officers at intervals on the right and left, and two steady old fellows on the flanks, who know every inch of the woods, and have occupied the same position for years past.

For the first few minutes the advance is made in silence, and nothing is heard but the tap-tap of the beaters' sticks and the crackling of dry leaves and branches as they force their way through the underwood. But they have not gone far before the keen eye of one of them detects a rabbit in a tuft of dried grass; and a poke of his stick sends him flying up the bank. "Rabbit up; mark rabbit!" is the cry, and in another moment master bunny, neatly rolled over by the guardsman, tumbles head over heels down the bank, and the sport has begun. At the report of the gun up gets a splendid cock pheasant, rather too far for a shot, but at which Gerard in his

excitement promptly lets drive, without any palpable result beyond considerable destruction of twigs in the line of fire. "Mark over!" now resounds from the line; and the magnificent bird, the sunlight gleaming on his glossy plumage, rises high above the trees, and with a crow of defiance wings his way across the open, as if making for the far end of the wood. But his flight is not of long duration; for as he sails over the corner guarded by the veteran Mr Bickersteth, a puff of smoke and an echoing report rise from the hollow, and a crumpled mass of feathers in mid-air continues on its course for a moment, carried on by the impetus of its rapid flight, and then topples headlong down. "Ah, there's Muster Bickersteth," grins Jonas approvingly, "he can pull 'em down pretty straight, he can. Easy on the right there; come round the left. Now then, all together;" and on they go again. Gerard and the guardsman have some good fun with the rabbits, which are lying out well; and every likely-looking tuft of grass or heap of brushwood is explored by the busy sticks of the beaters, resulting in a lively popping being kept up

inside the covert. The pheasants, however, have mostly run on to the end of the wood, where the undergrowth is thicker; and with the exception of one or two stray birds that have broken away on the flanks, the guns outside have not as yet had much to do.

"Look out here, sir," says Jonas to Gerard, as they approach an open space among the trees, "they partridges should be somewhere hereabout;" and, before the words are well out of his mouth, there is a splutter and commotion as if a firework had exploded in the middle of the wood. Up get the birds in all directions, screaming and chattering like so many parrots. Some fly straight in the beaters' faces, causing much ducking of heads and flourishing of sticks. Two or three break away to the right, affording a nice double shot to the guardsman, and the remainder rise straight up in the air, and go away over the trees to the left. Bang! bang! go the "Cadger's" two barrels without any apparent result; but a brace that have been turned slightly out of their line by the shots pass high over Lord Sydmonton's head, and are pulled down handsomely right and left, while

in another moment one of the "Cadger's" birds is seen to tower and fall headlong in the middle of a field about two hundred yards away from the wood.

"Come, there's five birds out of that lot," says Jonas, "that's not so bad." So the birds in the wood are picked up, an under-keeper with a retriever goes after the towered bird, and the line again advances.

But we are approaching the corner where that veteran sportsman, Mr Bickersteth, has been posted, and the old gentleman may be discerned in an expectant attitude by a pollard willow on the far side of the pond. Now, too, the end of the covert comes in view, and although we cannot as yet catch sight of the Marquis, an occasional shot indicates his whereabouts, while the tap-tap from the sticks of various little smock-frocked boys comes pleasantly up the hollow. Here the line is halted, and a redistribution of the forces takes place. "You two gentlemen stop here, while I go down and speak to his lordship," says Jonas, addressing the guardsman and Gerard. A short council of war ensues, resulting in the word being passed for Captain Aylmer. Down

comes the guardsman, and joins the party outside.

"Aylmer," says Lord Sydmonton, "you stop here by the pond, please, and Ballybrack and I will divide the space between you and the end. It's impossible to say which way the birds will break here, but they are just as likely to go back as forward, and I think you are certain to get some shooting here. Courtenay," to Gerard, who has edged down to hear what is going on, "you'd better stop back in the wood, as some are sure to go back that way, and you must look well after the rabbits too. Now, Ballybrack, you come with me, and I'll post you."

But let it not be supposed that after all these preliminaries we are about to inflict upon our readers a description of a "hot corner," according to the general acceptation of the words; for this is not at all the fashion at Sydmonton. The traditions of the place were all against such modern innovations, and Lord Sydmonton was the last man to allow his own ideas of good old-fashioned sport to be influenced by the dictates of fashion. No clouds of over-fed pheasants struggling up, to

be shot almost at the muzzles of the guns; no rows of loaders behind each sportsman, cramming cartridges into guns so hot with firing as to make their handling a somewhat delicate task. His lordship was, in fact, by no means in favour of second guns, and though the practice was not absolutely forbidden, he never gave it any encouragement. "Bring out your second gun, by all means, if you like," he would say, "if you are sure your man will not blow your head off with it; but I cannot promise that you will find work for it, and I certainly cannot detach a keeper to load for you." So it came to be understood that a second gun was not quite the thing at Sydmonton; although it must be confessed that, notwithstanding his lordship's modest estimate of the resources of his coverts, there were times when ample employment might have been found for half-a-dozen sportsmen with two guns apiece. But somehow or other every one seemed to fall in with the idea, and although a few fashionable shooters might at first grumble at their host's antiquated prejudices, and declare that they could not possibly shoot with only one gun, it never appeared

that Lord Sydmonton's shooting was any the less popular. On the present occasion, the "Cadger," who was looked upon as rather a privileged individual, and the Marquis were the only two with second guns, the remainder being content to follow the custom of the country, and do the best they could with one.

But the guns have now been quietly posted, Mr Jonas has resumed command of the beaters, and whatever pheasants have run forward will soon have to show themselves. "Mark over!" again resounds from the top of the bank, and an old hen pheasant, so big and dark-coloured as, but for a certain deficiency about the tail, to be scarcely discernible from a cock, rises straight up in the air, and, apparently uncertain whether to go forward or back, adopts a middle course, and skims down the wind towards the corner now occupied by the guardsman. "Over you, Aylmer!" calls out Lord Sydmonton; and in another moment the ancient bird crumples up, and falls with a tremendous splash into the pond, to the intense delight of a small boy who, relieved from his duties as "stop," is now standing behind the gallant captain,

whose performance he is evidently prepared to regard with a thoroughly critical eye. "Well done," murmurs his lordship, and at that moment a cock pheasant gets up out of the hedge in front of him, and flies straight back over the beaters' heads, affording an easy shot to Gerard, who has just rolled over a rabbit with his first barrel. "Mark that bird," calls out Jonas, and a boy runs back for it. "Steady, beaters; keep your sticks going. Another rabbit back, sir!" But the rabbit is equal to the occasion, and making straight for the boy who has gone back after the pheasant, in spite of that young gentleman's vociferations and frantic flourishing of his stick he deprives Gerard of the chance of a shot, and disappears into a thicket unhurt.

"Mark over! mark over!" again shout the beaters, as two cock pheasants and a hen rise together and sail over to the guns outside. The "Cadger" this time gets a good right and left at a cock and hen, while Lord Sydmonton disposes of the other cock. "Woodcock!" yells a beater in his excitement, as a small dusky bird flops out of some sedges at his feet. "Woodcock be hanged!" growls an

under-keeper reprovingly; "it's only a water-hen!" and amidst the suppressed chuckling of his fellows the too-impulsive beater retires into himself. But the mistake is soon forgotten, for the pheasants are now getting up in all directions, and for a few minutes all the guns have plenty to do. One after another the birds rise up over the trees, and come high over the guns outside. No blowing to pieces here, but good "tall" rocketers, that take plenty of shooting.

"D—— it," exclaims the "Cadger," working hard at a cartridge that is inclined to stick, "these birds are worth a sovereign a-piece!" and, throwing up his gun, he misses a splendid old cock, thereby giving Mr Bickersteth a chance of "wiping his eye," which feat he accomplishes most successfully. The shooting has, in fact, become general all round, and for the moment the "Cadger" and the Marquis find their second guns very useful. The last-named nobleman, an enormous cigar in his mouth, his hat very much on one side, and his legs very far apart, is making a very fair performance at the extreme end of the covert, as is testified by various inanimate

masses of fur and feather lying in picturesque confusion about him. Gerard, too, standing back in the wood, has his fair share of sport, and holds his own with his gun, happily not converted into a fire-shovel, as in his dream in the train. He has got into an open space behind a couple of tall fir-trees, the tops of which just give him a capital line; and has polished off four or five satisfactory rocketers coming back, besides some half-dozen rabbits, and a stray partridge that gets up from no one knows where, and gives him perhaps the most sporting shot of all.

But the fire now slackens; the beaters are at the end of the wood, and it is evident that there is nothing more left to come out. One more rabbit pops up at the last moment, and runs the gauntlet of the beaters' sticks, which, however, he successfully evades, and gets to ground triumphantly before any one can get a safe shot at him. Out come the beaters, and the guns get together, and discuss their performances, while the underkeepers and retrievers set to work to collect the slain.

"Well, Marquis," says Lord Sydmonton, as that distinguished sportsman approaches with

the air of a victorious general, "I hope you have had some shooting at the end there?"

"Mon Dieu! c'est magnifique," replies the Marquis; "I 'ave kill twenty, five-and-twenty pheasant, and some 'ares. Mais regardez donc!" and with a triumphant expression he pulls out of his pocket a woodcock, which he holds up for general inspection.

"Well done!" says old Mr. Bickersteth, "that's the first woodcock I've seen this year. Where did he get up, Marquis? None of us saw him."

"Aha!" chuckles the Marquis, "he get up vere none of you see him, by the brook there, and he come straight along to me, and just as I put up my gun, down he go again. 'Ah! mon ami,' says I, 'but I vill 'ave you yet,' and just as the beatares come round the corner there, up he get again, and fly right over the bank, and I bang! bang! and knock him over with my seconde barrel."

"Well," says Lord Sydmonton, "I hardly expected to see a woodcock here; but I hope now we shall see some in the next beat, where there's better cover for them. Now then, let's see what we've killed here."

By this time the game has been brought in, and laid in rows on a grassy bank. First the cock pheasants, resplendent in their gorgeous plumage; then the hens, in their more sober feathering of russet brown; and then the plump partridges, with the Marquis' woodcock, which he gives up, not without some reluctance, in a post of honour by itself. Below come a line of rabbits and some half-dozen hares. The beaters stand around and mop their heated brows, or exchange observations in an undertone. The warm mid-day sun gleams on the glossy backs of the pheasants, and lights up the soft fur of the ground game. Altogether a pretty picture of English rural sport.

Lord Sydmonton takes a stick from the nearest beater, and proceeds to count the game. "Two, four, six, eight, seventeen cock pheasants. Twenty-eight,—no, twenty-nine hens,—that's forty-six pheasants. Six partridges and a woodcock. How many rabbits, Jonas? Twenty-four,—ah! and seven hares. Hollo! there's that dog of yours bringing another cock; that makes forty-seven pheasants. Well, that's very fair for this beat.

Do you think all your birds have been picked up, Marquis?" This rather slyly, for the gallant Frenchman is perhaps just a little given to romancing, and his twenty or five-and-twenty pheasants resolve themselves, when collected, into fifteen, exclusive of one that he and Mr Bickersteth have shot at together, and over which they are now holding a courteous but energetic discussion.

"Oh, yes, they all pick up," replies the Marquis confidently, "they vos all kill dead; n'est-ce pas, Tom," appealing to his English servant, who has been carrying his second gun.

"Yes, my lord," replies that domestic, with much gravity, touching his hat to Lord Sydmonton, "the Marquis's birds are all picked up, except two that have fallen in that wood yonder, my lord."

"Ah, well, we shall very likely find them, then," says Lord Sydmonton, with a quiet smile, "as we're going that way. Now, gentlemen, we ought to be moving on. I can't promise you so many pheasants in the next beat, and it will be rather rough walking; but I think we ought to get some wood-

cocks. Now, Jonas, you had better get your men on."

But pleasant as a good day's shooting is to those concerned, the mere record of how a pheasant got up here, or a rabbit was missed there, is apt to become somewhat monotonous. We will not, therefore, weary our readers with any further account of the day's sport, beyond mentioning that when the bag was counted up on the little grass plot in front of the watchers' house at Speed Gate, it was found to comprise a hundred and seventy pheasants, a hundred and fifteen rabbits, thirty-two hares, fourteen partridges, eleven woodcocks, and three teal. Altogether a total of three hundred and forty-five head; to say nothing of a jay and an owl, the latter having been shot by the Marquis in mistake for a woodcock.

"Not much of a bag, after all this fuss!" we think we can hear some fashionable sportsman observe, as he turns up his nose at, to him, such a humble day's sport. Perhaps not, from the poulterer's view of the case. But as Lord Sydmonton and his friends give up their guns, and start to walk home across

the park, over the old trees of which the moon is now beginning to rise, they feel as if they had had a fair share of walking as well as some very enjoyable shooting, and could look forward to a well-earned dinner. And we doubt whether the performers at nine out of ten of the "big shoots" of the present day would be able to say as much.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHAWFIELD BALL.

"You are prepared for a ball to-morrow night, I hope, Marquis?" said Lady Sydmonton to her neighbour at dinner that evening.

"Mais oui, certainement," replied the Marquis, "I shall go to the ball, and you shall show me the beauties of the voisinage, n'est-ce pas? But I think," with a gallant bow, "Lady Sydmonton shall always be the queen of them all."

"Thank you, Marquis," rejoined her ladyship, with a graceful little inclination of her head; "that's very pretty, indeed. But you mustn't talk like that to our quiet country girls down here, or you will turn all their heads and break all their hearts. And you mustn't expect anything very grand, Marquis. It is what we call a county ball, you know; and all sorts of people come to it. You will

see some very funny people, and some very funny dresses. I daresay, however, you will see a few people you know, and sometimes it is rather amusing. You won't mind dining a little earlier than usual, I hope, as we have nine miles to drive, and we are supposed to be there pretty early. Mr Bickersteth, I really think we must make you come this time. You haven't been to a Shawfield ball for ever so long, and all the young ladies miss you dreadfully, I hear."

"No, no, Lady Sydmonton," replied Mr Bickersteth with a smile, "I'm too old for that sort of thing. I think a quiet evening with his lordship is more in my line; and perhaps we'll have a little fun of our own while you're away, for all you know!"

"Ah, yes," put in the "Cadger;" "I'm not at all sure that I'd trust those two alone, Lady Sydmonton. Don't you think, now, it would be as well if I were to stay and look after them, just to see that they don't get into mischief, you know?"

"Certainly not, Lord Ballybrack," replied Lady Sydmonton, with an affectation of severity; "I wouldn't leave you at home on

any consideration. There's no saying what mightn't happen. Besides, you don't suppose I am going to let off one of my dancing young men! The Shawfield young ladies would never forgive me."

"What time shall you want to dine, then," inquired Lord Sydmonton from the other end of the table; "you'll give them time to get home after shooting, I hope?"

"Oh, Sydmonton, of course!" exclaimed her ladyship. "Why, we needn't start till nine, I suppose; so if we have dinner at seven, that will give us plenty of time. You can't shoot after five, surely, and that will give you two hours."

"Well, as you like," returned his lordship, "but we've got a longish day, as we're going to Quarrington Forest, so we must make an early start. What will the ladies say to breakfasting at eight, or shall we have breakfast by ourselves?"

"Oh, we can settle that by-and-by," said Lady Sydmonton; "but if you are going to the Forest, you had better have a separate breakfast. You really can't expect us to be down at eight, you know." And the conver-

sation taking another turn, the subject was for the moment dropped.

The Shawfield county ball was a great institution in the south of Wealdshire, and was generally well attended; for although on the Sydmonton side of the county there were comparatively few large houses, and the resident gentry were scattered about at long distances from the county town, on the other, or eastern side, there was a much thicker population; and there were plenty of houses, large and small, most of them able to contribute a fair proportion of ball-goers, apart from the visitors invited for the occasion. And as the beauty of the Wealdshire ladies was proverbial, and the dancing arrangements were generally well and vigorously carried out, there was always a considerable influx of strangers on these occasions, and the usually sleepy old town woke up for one night to an unwonted semblance of life and gaiety. The ball was held in the old Assembly Rooms attached to the White Horse Hotel, a celebrated posting-house in the old coaching days, and still boasting a considerable extent of tumble-down stabling, which on ball nights was in great requisition.

The hotel itself was accordingly available for extra accommodation in the way of cloak-rooms and other adjuncts, so that on the whole there was a greater degree of comfort than is often met with on similar occasions, where some miserable little den has to do duty for a ladies' cloak-room, and the gentlemen have to deposit their hats and coats in the passage.

"Then you sportsmen will breakfast at eight," said Lady Sydmonton as the party separated for the night, "so we shan't meet again till you come home. Mind you don't over-tire yourself, Lord Ballybrack, or you won't be able to dance, and that would be very sad. Good-night, Marquis; good-night, everybody." And after the usual hand-shaking and candle-lighting, a performance, by the way, which may be made to comprehend a good deal of quiet "business" where there is any predisposition to flirtation, the ladies rustled up the wide staircase, and the gentlemen wended their way to the smoking-room.

Quarrington Forest was one of Lord Sydmonton's out-lying beats, detached from the rest of the property, and about seven miles from the house. It was a large tract of rough

ground, partly real oak forest, where there were ancient trees that might have witnessed the Norman invasion, and partly heather and scrub, intermingled with the picturesque clumps of fir-trees which are such common landmarks in that part of the country. It was a capital breeding-ground for pheasants, all wild birds, moreover, and well able to take good care of themselves; and there were many spots that were hardly ever without a woodcock or two during the winter months. There were plenty of rabbits too, and the low scrub was a favourite resort of partridges; so that for a real sporting day's shooting it would have been difficult to beat. But although there was plenty of game, it required hard work to bring to bag; and a sure foot as well as a quick eye was essential to success in Quarrington Forest.

When, therefore, our sportsmen found themselves back at Sydmonton at about half-past six in the evening, after a long though very enjoyable day's sport, there was not one of them who felt particularly keen about the ball that night; and those who were bound to go were rather inclined to envy Lord Sydmonton

and Mr Bickersteth, who were able to look forward to a quiet evening at home. The tea in the library was cold and uncared for; and the ladies had disappeared, either to dress, or to enjoy a nap in preparation for the fatigues of the evening. So our friends dispersed to their rooms, to make the most of the short time left them before dinner, the "Cadger" asseverating, as he despatched his servant for some brandy and seltzer, that he was dead-beat, and that he would be hanged if he didn't think he would shirk the ball after all. But when the party reassembled at dinner, a more cheerful tone was observable, encouraged perhaps by the somewhat "scratch" and informal character of the repast. Lady Chetwynd, it is true, was in full dress, and presented a most imposing appearance; but the other ladies were still in *demi-toilette*, Lady Sydmonton and Mrs Fortescue, the fair-haired lady we noticed at the breakfast-table, in cunningly-devised "tea-gowns," and the two Miss Chetwynds still in their morning-dresses. It must be confessed that one of the last-named young ladies had confided to Gerard that she had had her hair done; and

a close observer might possibly have noticed a more than usually ornate appearance about the other fair heads round the table. Otherwise there was nothing indicative of the approaching festivity, and nobody would have supposed that such a sedately-attired party were about to pass the night in the dissipation of a county ball.

"Now then," said Lady Sydmonton, as she rose from the table, "mind you are all in time. There's half an hour before we start, so you have plenty of time to adorn yourselves. We shall go in two carriages, but we shall all start together, so we can settle that by-and-by."

"By Jove, Sydmonton!" exclaimed the "Cadger" as the door closed on the departing ladies, and he stretched himself luxuriously before the fire, "what fools we are to go to this ball, eh? Hanged if I wouldn't much rather stop and have a quiet evening with you. I say, we've had a ripping day. That was a nice shot of yours, Marquis, that last old cock that came over the fir-trees just before we finished."

"Yes, he tomble down," replied the Mar-

quis, sententiously, as he helped himself to a glass of claret. "Mais, que diable! Sydmonton, mon cher, that forest of yours shall be très dangereux. I come a devil of a croppaire on some rocks, and was near to lose myself in a marais—a bog, n'est-ce pas? when, malheureusement! up get a woodcock, and I stick in the mud, and he fly away before I have time to shoot him."

"Ah, there are some queer places there," smiled Lord Sydmonton, "and one has to be careful how one goes. But I'm very glad you didn't hurt yourself, Marquis, or you might have been prevented from going to the ball, and that would never have done."

"Mais non," replied the Marquis, with a shrug of his shoulders, "and it will soon be time for us to get ready, par exemple; eh, Bally, mon vieux?" to the "Cadger," who had now fallen asleep with his empty glass in his hand, and was beginning to snore peacefully after the fatigues of the day.

"Hollo!" exclaimed that nobleman, waking up with a start; "oh, d—— it, it isn't time to go yet?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't want to hurry you," said Lord Sydmonton, with the comfortable air of a man who had no intention of turning out at that time of night after a hard day's shooting; "but if you're going, you had better soon be thinking of it, as it won't do to keep the ladies waiting, you know."

"Come along, then," exclaimed the "Cadger," pulling himself together, and pouring out a parting glass of claret; "let's be off. Come along, you fellows. Bet you I'm ready before you, Marquis." And the dancing men took themselves off, leaving their host and Mr Bickersteth to continue their "crack" over the comfortable fire.

"Now then," said Lady Sydmonton, as she sailed into the drawing-room in the most charming of ball-dresses a minute or two after the clock had struck nine, "are we all ready? Let's see; we are five ladies and four gentlemen, so we must divide ourselves somehow. Lady Chetwynd, suppose you and I go in the landau, and perhaps Mrs Fortescue will chaperone your girls in the omnibus. Marquis, will you come with us? and that will

leave six for the omnibus. But where's Lord Ballybrack? I do hope he hasn't gone to sleep! Oh! there he is," as the "Cadger" entered, resplendent in the most faultless of white waistcoats, and with a large gardenia in his button-hole, which his faithful servant had that afternoon imported from London.

"Well, you are smart," said Lady Sydmonton, with a pretty little curtsy, "and with that lovely gardenia I'm afraid you won't look at my poor little bouquets," pointing to a row of dainty little "buttonholes" with which the others were adorning themselves. "But come along, for we ought to be off." And with much bustling on the part of men-servants, and subdued sounds of whispering from the maids in the gallery above, who had assembled to survey and criticise their mistresses' toilettes, the party proceeded to get under weigh; and in a few moments the ticking of the clocks and the fall of the ashes in the grate were all the sounds to be heard in the deserted rooms.

The roads were in good order, and the nine miles to Shawfield were quickly got over. The omnibus party was efficiently chaperoned

by Mrs Fortescue, who discharged her duties in the most conscientious manner by entirely appropriating the guardsman, who was both good-looking and a "parti," to herself, thus preventing the possibility of a flirtation with either of the young ladies, who were forced to console themselves with the "Cadger," who had long been regarded as hopeless from a matrimonial point of view, and with Gerard, who was an obvious "detrimental."

"By Jove, here we are!" exclaimed the "Cadger" as the level surface of the macadamised road was suddenly exchanged for the jarring of the cobblestones which announced the entrance to Shawfield; "now you two fellows, wake up!" His lordship having during the last quarter of an hour himself displayed an unmistakable tendency to relapse into the slumber to which the labours of the day had fairly entitled him, this adjuration on his part was received by Gerard and the guardsman with a certain amount of derision. All, however, began to prepare for disembarkation; and amid a general buttoning of gloves, searching for dropped fans, and adjustment of bouquets, the two carriages jolted over

the ill-paved side streets, till, turning into the open square in the centre of the town, they got into quite a small string of vehicles that were "setting down" at the door of the White Horse Hotel.

Having successfully accomplished the descent from their carriages, and passed through the gaping crowd at the doors, our party found themselves in the somewhat cramped entrance-hall of the hotel, from whence, however, they were speedily piloted by the obsequious landlord, who appeared to combine for the occasion the functions of a host with those of a groom of the chambers, to the ladies' cloak-room, a comfortable apartment on the first floor, the gentlemen being accommodated in a smaller room close by. The passage was full of fathers, husbands, brothers, and miscellaneous cavaliers, awaiting the reappearance of their respective ladies, while the distant tuning of fiddles indicated the whereabouts of the ball-room.

The Sydmonton party presented a highly respectable appearance as they entered the room, the Marquis with her ladyship, the "Cadger" with Lady Chetwynd, and the

three other ladies escorted on either side by the guardsman and Gerard. The room was already fairly well filled; but dancing had not yet commenced, and the floor was occupied by promenading groups, engrossed in mutual salutations and criticisms of each other's dresses. The entrance of Lady Sydmonton and her party was the signal for a general stir; and divers rosette-adorned gentlemen started forward to welcome her ladyship, and conduct her to the upper end of the room, where a bevy of other notabilities had already established themselves. The band, which had begun to manifest signs of impatience, struck up a few preliminary bars; partners were claimed for the first quadrille, and the ball began.

"Now, Mr Courtenay," said Lady Sydmonton to Gerard, as at the conclusion of the dance she was re-conducted by the Marquis to her place, "if you want partners, you had better come to me; for I know a good many of the people here, and you must do your duty, you know."

"Thanks, very much, Lady Sydmonton," replied Gerard. "I'm engaged to Miss Chet-

wynd for the first round dance; but after that I shall be most grateful for some introductions. I don't see any one I know as yet," looking round the room, "so I'm perfectly free at present."

"Very well, then," said Lady Sydmonton. "Look here, I'll introduce you to the Howards of Dallington, close by here;" and in another moment Gerard found himself enunciating the usual platitudes to two nice-looking country girls, who had all the appearance of having come to the ball to dance and thoroughly enjoy themselves. One introduction led to another, and Gerard, as well as the rest of the Sydmonton party, soon found their cards as full as they cared to have them.

"By the way," said Lady Sydmonton to Gerard, as they met at the other end of the room in the interval between two dances, "there is one other young lady I should like to introduce you to if you don't mind. She hasn't been out much yet, I fancy, and I daresay doesn't know many of the people here; but she's a nice girl, I believe, and I should like to get her some partners."

"Delighted, I'm sure," replied Gerard, as in

duty bound. "Where is she, Lady Sydmonton?"

"Well, I don't see her at this moment," returned her ladyship, looking round, "but she is here somewhere. Oh, there she is," indicating a slight, graceful-looking girl in white, who was standing with an old gentleman rather apart from the throng of dancers. "Will you excuse me one moment, Sir Henry?" to the good-looking but painfully shy young county dignitary on whose arm she was leaning; and in another moment Gerard found himself confronted with the young lady in white, who was introduced to him by Lady Sydmonton as Miss Graham.

Somehow or other, it seemed to Gerard as if he had seen the girl before, though when or where he was quite unable to call to mind. As, however, the band was already tuning up for the next dance, for which he was engaged to one of the Miss Howards, he had only time to engage her for a valse about four dances further on, and then went off in quest of his partner.

Meanwhile the ball progressed merrily. There were plenty of dancing men, of all

ages and sizes; for at the Shawfield county ball it was not considered the thing to be idle, and heavy fathers of families and staid old bachelors might be seen "taking the floor" with apparently as much energy as the younger men. Of the Sydmonton party, the Marquis and the "Cadger" were in great request; the former, with his parti-coloured ribbon and star of some august order, being an object of much interest and speculation, and evincing his appreciation of the Wealdshire ladies by dancing with all the prettiest girls in the room. The "Cadger," too, was in force, and had entered into the spirit of the thing with an *empressement* which had set more than one fair damsel thinking whether it would not be rather nice to be Lady Ballybrack. It must be confessed that there were two of our party who could hardly be said to have conscientiously discharged their duty to society; for Mrs Fortescue, who never did things by halves, had so completely monopolised the gallant Captain Aylmer, that, after the first two or three dances, that warrior was not to be found anywhere; and chance promenaders in search of air were more than

once disconcerted by coming suddenly upon a deeply-engrossed couple in a secluded corner of one of the ante-rooms, whence they would occasionally emerge for a turn or two during some particularly seductive valse, and return immediately to their former privacy.

So the evening wore on; and Gerard, consulting his card, found that he was engaged for the next valse to Miss Graham. He had thought very little, if at all, about her since his introduction; but now he began to wonder what she was like, whether she could dance, and what he was to talk to her about. He had hitherto enjoyed himself very much; and the second of the two Miss Chetwynds had, failing perhaps any one better, shown a certain disposition to treat him kindly, and had in fact caused him to think that being in her company was rather a pleasant thing. So he sought out his new partner, not feeling particularly keen about it, and in fact rather hoping either that she might be gone, or that some want of accord between their respective cards might intervene to release him from his engagement.

No such luck, however, was in store for

him; and on his casting up, not a moment too soon, at the point where he recollected to have first seen her, he found her still standing by the side of the old gentleman, who was apparently acting as her chaperon, and who was engaged in an animated discussion with another antiquated individual of a scientific aspect, whose general appearance was more suggestive of a learned meeting than a ball-room. Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that Miss Graham should exhibit an appearance of being just a trifle bored; and as Gerard appeared she was looking wistfully round, as if fearing that she was going to lose her dance after all. But as he approached, her eyes brightened, and it was evident, not only that there was no mistake about the engagement, but that she was looking forward to it a good deal more than her partner.

"By Jove," thought Gerard to himself as she placed her arm on his after the usual formula of "our dance, I think?" and a somewhat unsuccessful attempt on the gentleman's part to appear as if the moment had arrived to which he had been looking forward the

whole evening, "she's not a bad-looking girl. Wonder what sort of a mover she is!"

At this moment the band struck up the "Journalisten" valse, and whatever doubts Gerard might have entertained as to his partner's dancing powers were speedily dispelled. As he subsequently described his experiences to his friend George Morton, "she was as light on your arm as a feather, and seemed to fly over the floor. By Jove! you couldn't help going; she'd have made an elephant dance!"

The room was at this moment pretty clear, and they had a good long turn before stopping. "How beautifully you dance!" Gerard could not help saying to his partner, as they fell back for a moment out of the ring; "I am sure you must be very fond of it."

"Oh, yes, I'm so fond of it," replied the girl, with sparkling eyes and a blush that made Gerard think she was almost pretty; "but I hardly ever get any dancing. We live very quietly at home, and this is only the second time I have ever been to a ball."

Gerard could not at this moment think of anything particularly brilliant in the way of a

compliment; and seeing that his partner was evidently eager to go on, he thought the best thing he could do was to propose another turn, and they were speedily in the thick of it again. The dance seemed very short to both of them, and at its conclusion Gerard was forced to confess to himself that he had not had a pleasanter valse that evening.

"Won't you come and have some tea, or supper, or something?" he asked his partner. The next dance was a quadrille, for which he had purposely avoided engaging himself, having, to tell the truth, had some idea of asking the second Miss Chetwynd to "sit it out" with him. But he felt now as if he owed Miss Graham some reparation for the mental injustice he had done her, and magnanimously resolved to sacrifice himself.

"Yes, I think I should like a cup of tea," she replied; "but I don't know where it is."

"Oh, I know all about it," said Gerard, who had been on several similar expeditions during the evening, and off they went.

The tea-room was by this time pretty well deserted, in favour of the more solid attractions of supper. Gerard established his partner com-

fortably on a sofa, and proceeded to minister to her requirements. And as he returned to her with a cup of tea in one hand and a plate of rather sawdusty-looking sponge biscuits in the other, it suddenly struck him as odd that he had not taken more notice of her before. There was nothing about her that would single her out for observation in a well-dressed crowd; but as she sat alone there, her rather pale face still lighted up by the excitement of dancing, it would have been a fastidious critic that would not have been inclined to pronounce her a very nice-looking, lady-like girl. There was nothing calling for admiration in the way of classical outline of feature or brilliancy of colouring. The features were, if anything, rather too small; and the soft brown hair was cut short over a forehead which many would have pronounced too high for beauty. But there was a peculiar sweetness about the lines of the mouth, and a certain wistful look about the dark hazel eyes, that in a measure made up for the absence of more decided attractions. It was, in fact, a very *lovable* face, and one that would have a tendency to grow upon any one. She was

rather above middle height, with a graceful, lissom figure, which the simplest of square-cut white dresses scarcely showed to advantage; and wore no ornaments but two little black velvet bands on her wrists, and a quaint, old-fashioned cross on a thin gold chain looped up to another black velvet band round her throat.

Taking in these points as he sat down beside her, Gerard began to think that his companion might really be rather interesting. But, now that the momentary excitement of dancing was over, she did not evince any great aptitude for conversation, and he was rather at a loss what to talk to her about. Having tried the conversational topics of the ball, the floor, and the music, with but indifferent success, he was beginning to rack his brains for something else, when his eye rested on the curious-looking cross that she wore round her neck, and it struck him that here might be a possible opening.

"What a pretty cross that is!" he said, feeling, we are bound to say, not the very slightest interest in the matter.

But he had struck a sympathetic cord, and

the girl's face brightened up immediately "Oh, yes," she exclaimed, eagerly, "isn't it pretty? It was given to me by my dear Mr Montenello, and he says it once belonged to Mary Queen of Scots."

"And who is Mr Montenello?" asked Gerard, amused with her little confidence; "I never heard of any one of that name before."

"Oh, I forgot," she replied; "how stupid of me! Of course you couldn't know anything about him. But he's a great friend of Mr Baldwin's—where I live, you know—and he has been so kind to me. He lives in Venezuela, though, which is a long way off," she added, rather regretfully, "and he doesn't often come to England. But he wants me to go out there and see him some day, and I should so like to go!"

"Ah, Venezuela," rejoined Gerard, who, we are afraid, was a little hazy as to the exact whereabouts of that interesting country; "oh, yes, of course, that's a long way off. But it isn't much of a place to live in, I expect, is it? and you would find it very hot and uncomfortable. Yellow fever, and all that sort of thing, I fancy?"

"Oh, no," she replied, rather indignantly, as if bound to stand up for the character of her friend's country, "it isn't at all like that. Mr Montenello says that where he lives there are beautiful plains and downs, something like these about here, and you ride about all day, and that would be so nice!"

"Ah, yes, that would be very jolly, of course," said Gerard, catching at what he hoped might afford another topic of conversation; "you are very fond of riding, I daresay?"

"Oh, there's nothing I'm so fond of," she replied, eagerly. "I should like to be riding all day long. You know we have beautiful downs to ride over here, and sometimes I go out with the harriers, and that is such fun. But some day I'm going to try and get Mr Baldwin to let me go out with the foxhounds, and I do hope he will."

A light suddenly broke in upon Gerard. Harriers! downs! Of course! this was the very girl on the chestnut whom he had seen when walking about the Southdowns with George Morton in the spring. He sat up on the sofa, and looked at her with increasing interest.

"I thought I had seen you somewhere

before," he said, "but I couldn't quite remember where it was. Haven't you got a chestnut mare that you ride sometimes with the harriers?"

"Yes, but how ever did you know that?" she replied, opening her eyes wide with astonishment. "You haven't been hunting down here, have you?"

"No," replied Gerard, laughing; "but I may have seen you hunting for all that. The fact is, I was taking a walk last spring with a friend of mine over the downs near Middlehaven, and we came upon a pack of harriers, and you were there with an old gentleman, who I suppose is the same you are here with to-night, only I couldn't be quite certain about him. But I am sure about you," he added, looking into her pretty eyes, "and it was very stupid of me not to have remembered you before."

"Oh, now I recollect you, of course!" exclaimed Miss Graham, with a childish delight; "you were sitting on the top of a bank as we came away, and you had a dear little dog with you, that barked at us, and Kathleen pretended to be frightened. But

that was all nonsense; only she is so silly sometimes. How curious that we should have met again here!"

"Yes, isn't it?" replied Gerard, beginning to think that he was very glad they had met. "Poor little Smut! I've lost him, I'm sorry to say. I think I should know your mare too, if I saw her again. How nicely she jumps! I'm sure she's Irish; isn't she?"

"Yes," returned Miss Graham, "she came from somewhere near Limerick, I believe. But how did you know she could jump? Oh, I remember now; there was a bank and ditch she jumped over just before we left off. Yes, she jumps beautifully, doesn't she? Oh, I'm so fond of her, and she'll follow me all about the place, just like a dog."

"No wonder, I'm sure," thought Gerard, for the moment rather inclined to envy the chestnut mare. "Do you live far from here?" he continued, thinking he would like to know something more about Miss Graham, her chestnut mare, and her belongings generally.

"About six miles by the road," she replied, "but you can ride it in four over the downs. It's just at the edge of the downs, and we've

got a beautiful view of the sea too, through what they call a Dean,—a sort of glen, you know, between two hills."

Gerard would have liked to put a few more questions to his companion as to the exact locality of her residence, her relationship to Mr Baldwin, whom he correctly assumed to be the old gentleman present with her at the ball, and various other matters. But at this moment the sound of the music in the ball-room ceased, and Miss Graham beginning to look round rather uneasily, as if fearful of staying away too long from her chaperon, Gerard felt that their little *tête-à-tête* must be brought to an end.

"I suppose I ought to be taking you back to the ball-room," he said, "but you will give me another dance, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, I shall be delighted," she replied. "I've enjoyed this one so much. Which shall it be?"

"Let's see," said Gerard, looking at his card; "oh, dear, I'm engaged for the next two round dances. Will you give me the third, Miss Graham, that will be number thirteen on the card?"

"I'm afraid we shall be gone before that," she replied; "but if we are still here, I shall be delighted."

"Oh, surely Mr Baldwin will stay," exclaimed Gerard, feeling as if he would be very much inclined to pick a quarrel with the old gentleman if he did not. "Why, it's only a quarter to one now!"

"Oh, he would stay if I asked him," replied the girl, "but it isn't good for him to be up very late, he is so apt to catch cold; and I couldn't bear to think of his doing that on my account. But we shall see when the time comes. Will you write your name down?" giving him her poor little card, on which only two other names besides his own were as yet inscribed, "and then there will be no mistake."

"I'm afraid you have had very little dancing to-night," said Gerard, looking at her meagre list of engagements, and feeling quite indignant that a girl who could dance so well should either be so little known or so little appreciated.

"Oh, I know so few people," she replied, a little sadly perhaps. "You see, we live

very quietly, and I hardly ever see any one at home. But I have enjoyed to-night very much, though. I mean," with a blush, and thinking that she had perhaps said too much, "not only the dancing, you know. It's such fun going to a ball!"

"Well, I do hope you will get Mr Baldwin to stay, and that we shall have another dance," said Gerard, as he escorted her back to the ball-room.

"Oh, I should like it so much," she replied, "but you mustn't mind if we are gone, because of Mr Baldwin, you know. Oh, there he is. Thank you so much." And Gerard, feeling that he had no further excuse for remaining with her, and being, moreover, engaged for the next dance, was compelled to take his departure, and seek out his partner in a somewhat discontented frame of mind.

Somehow or other the ball seemed to him after this to have suddenly become flat and unprofitable; and not even the fascinations of Miss Chetwynd could arouse him to any further sense of enjoyment. He kept looking out anxiously for Miss Graham, and saw her dancing again with some one else, for whom he instantly conceived an altogether unde-

served and unreasonable feeling of hostility. But when, on his return from the supper-room with a damsel whose insipid prattle had bored him to distraction, he saw the placard announcing the thirteenth dance hoisted in front of the orchestra, he found to his dismay that she had disappeared from her place. He went hurriedly round the room, but there was no trace either of her or her chaperon, and it was evident that they had gone. Inwardly objurgating the infirmities of Mr Baldwin, he proceeded to try the supper-room, cloak-room, and other adjacent apartments, but without success; and at length had the satisfaction of being informed, on inquiring among the miscellaneous crowd of domestics in the entrance hall, that Mr Baldwin and Miss Graham had been gone for the last twenty minutes.

Feeling just a little ashamed of his impetuosity, Gerard returned to the ball-room, with the honest intention of doing his duty for the rest of the evening. But the ball was over for him, and it was a relief when, an hour later, he found himself one of a sleepy party in the omnibus on the way back to Sydmonton.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OLD STORY.

The day after a country ball is generally attended by a certain feeling of demoralisation, and Sydmonton Place constituted no exception to the general rule. It had been announced before the party separated, between three and four in the morning, that breakfast would be at half-past ten, but that nobody need be very particular as to punctuality, as it would be kept going all the morning. The latitude thus allowed was taken advantage of by more than one of the party; and at a quarter to eleven the only representatives of the ball-going contingent were Lady Sydmonton and Lady Chetwynd. The two young ladies, we are bound to say, put in an appearance shortly afterwards, looking none the worse for their over-night dissipation; but on inquiries being made respecting Mrs Fortescue, it was ascertained that she had ordered her

breakfast upstairs. The same course, it subsequently transpired, had been adopted by the Marquis and the "Cadger." The gallant Captain Aylmer appeared as the clock struck eleven; and Gerard, we are sorry to say, was a good last, having only managed to reach the dining-room just as the ladies were preparing to withdraw.

Lord Sydmonton was far too good a sportsman to run the risk of having his pheasants "tailored" by gentlemen who had been up all night, and whose nerves and hands could hardly be expected to be quite as steady as usual. No regular shooting, therefore, had been arranged for the day after the ball, though it was ordained that for any one who wished for a walk, combined with a little sport, there was to be some rabbit-shooting at the far end of the deer-park, with the probability of some shots at ducks in the afternoon on some pools higher up the stream. So, after some discussion, it was decided that Gerard and Captain Aylmer should start at twelve o'clock and shoot rabbits till two, when the ladies would join them with the Marquis and the "Cadger," in the event of those worthies

being by that time sufficiently up to the mark; and as it was a fine sunny day, they would all have luncheon together in some sheltered spot in the deer-park, after which the sportsmen could go on after the ducks or come home with the ladies, as they felt inclined. Lord Sydmonton, it should be observed, who as a rule was opposed on principle to the presence of ladies out shooting, had started early with Mr Bickersteth on a visit of inspection to some outlying farms, and would not be home till late.

It was a soft, warm morning; and the rabbits lying out well in the bracken on the sunny slopes of the deer-park, the two sportsmen had plenty of occupation. Gerard was glad of the distraction; for, somehow or other, he had caught himself thinking a good deal about Miss Graham, and wishing he could have had another dance with her. He was angry with himself too; for, as he very sagaciously endeavoured to argue, what on earth had he got to do with her?—a girl whom he would probably never see again, and about whom there was really nothing very remarkable? She danced beautifully, cer-

tainly; and no doubt she could ride too. But so could plenty of other girls, and after all, what business was it of his? She certainly had looked very well on that chestnut, now he thought of it, and he wondered that he had not noticed her more at the time. But, hang it all! what was the use of bothering about it now? So he blazed away at the rabbits, and was glad to find, by luncheon-time, that he had in some measure succeeded in dismissing Miss Graham from his thoughts.

The luncheon-party in the deer-park that fine November day would have made a pretty study for an artist. A warm, sheltered spot had been selected in a hollow facing the south, and the dry bracken, covered with rugs and game-bags, supplied the softest and most luxurious of seats. At their feet lay a still, deep pool, from one end of which a steep rock rose up perpendicularly for about twenty feet, crowned by a cluster of overhanging birches, whose still golden foliage was sharply mirrored in the clear water beneath. A tiny streamlet trickled out of the other end of the pool, and meandered down a rushy track,

which gradually lost itself in the long grass and fern beyond. An occasional gleam of bright colouring in a lady's dress afforded a pretty contrast to the russet hues of the bracken and the surrounding foliage, and keepers, beaters, and dogs were grouped in picturesque confusion in a snug corner lower down.

They were a merry party too, and the sound of light laughter echoed pleasantly through the ferny hollow. Much sympathy was expressed for the "Cadger," who professed himself utterly knocked up with his overnight exertions, and who had come out armed with nothing more formidable than a walking-stick, protesting that it would have been useless for him to take a gun, as in the existing state of his nerves it would be impossible for him to hit a haystack. The Marquis, on the other hand, was comparatively fresh and jaunty, faultlessly got up *au chasseur*, and declared that he would have started with the others had it not been for some arrears of correspondence which required to be cleared off. The ball was of course the chief topic of conversation, and a considerable amount of chaff was ban-

died about on all sides, not unmixed with some quiet though forcible hits on the part of the other ladies at Mrs Fortescue, whose behaviour with the gallant guardsman had evoked the motherly indignation of Lady Chetwynd, who had expressed her opinion that the lady in question would have been better employed in looking after her husband in India, or the Colonies, or wherever he was, and had even provoked a few remarks from Lady Sydmonton, than whom, as a rule, no one was inclined to look more leniently upon any reasonable flirtation, but whose spirit of justice and fair-play resented such wholesale appropriation of the most eligible young man of the party. So Mrs Fortescue had not a particularly good time of it just then, and may possibly have thought that her amusement of the previous evening had been somewhat dearly purchased. But there is a good deal of the ancient Spartan or modern Red Indian about most women, especially when on trial in the presence of their own sex, and we are bound to confess that, fortified perhaps by the consciousness of a very becoming dress, and a

pair of Thomas's masterpieces in the way of walking boots, for the display of which the situation offered ample opportunities, Mrs Fortescue took her punishment very well.

It was rather a relief to Gerard to find that his *tête-à-tête* with Miss Graham had apparently not attracted notice, and that among the criticisms that were freely passed upon the general company at the ball, her name was not even mentioned. For during luncheon, and now that the excitement of shooting was over for the time, his thoughts would persist in reverting to her in a most unaccountable manner; and he felt that any chaff on the subject would have been distasteful to him. At the same time, he felt a growing desire to know something more about her, and resolved that, if he got an opportunity of doing so without displaying an undue amount of interest, he would sound Lady Sydmonton on the subject.

"Well," observed her ladyship at length, as the conversation began to slacken, "I suppose you sportsmen will want to be going on. What o'clock is it, Marquis? Just three? Good gracious! I had no idea we had been so

long. Why, if you want to get any ducks you ought to be off at once."

"Oh, hang the ducks!" broke in the "Cadger," who, reclining luxuriously on a plaid shawl, with a cigarette in his mouth, and his hat well over his eyes, evinced not the smallest disposition to move; "what's the use of bothering about them? It's much jollier sitting here in the sun; isn't it, Lady Chetwynd?" appealing feelingly to that exemplary matron, who had herself displayed a certain tendency to fall asleep.

"I'm afraid you're dreadfully lazy, Lord Ballybrack," replied Lady Chetwynd, laughing. "Besides, I'm sure the Marquis wants to kill some ducks," looking towards that undaunted sportsman, who was beginning to fumble with his cartridges, handle his *couteau de-chasse*, and display other signs of his readiness to take the field.

"*Mais oui*," replied the Marquis, "but why should not the ladies come too? Çe serait charmant, and we will shoot the canards sauvages ensemble?"

"Well," said Lady Sydmonton, "I'm not quite sure about that. But we might perhaps

come part of the way with you. I don't quite know where you are going, and we must ask the keepers. Jonas!" her ladyship called out, standing up, and looking towards the group of keepers and beaters beneath.

"'Yes, my lady," was the reply, and up hurried Mr Jonas, hat in hand, to receive her ladyship's commands.

"Where are you going to take the gentlemen to, Jonas?" continued Lady Sydmonton. "I suppose it will be some of the petts up towards Penhurst?"

"Yes, my lady," replied Jonas. "My lord said as we'd better try—Breeches Pett first, my lady"—with a deprecatory cough and touch of his forehead, as if apologising for the mention of a name which could suggest to her ladyship's ears such an unmentionable article of clothing—"and then go on to 'Baccopipe and the petts round by Fox Earth."

"Oh, yes, I understand," said Lady Sydmonton with a smile. "You see, dear Lady Chetwynd," turning to that somewhat puzzled matron, "we are very plain, matter-of-fact people down here, and because the shape

of one of these ponds is supposed to be like a pair of—yes, exactly—we name it accordingly; the same with Tobaccopipe, and so on. Well, Jonas, we might perhaps walk with the gentlemen as far as—ahem! the first pett, and then we could go home by Cribbs' farm and the old bridge?"

"Yes, my lady," responded Mr Jonas with alacrity. "If your ladyship thinks of going we ought to be moving, my lady, or we shall hardly get there in time."

"Well, Lady Chetwynd, what do you say to a walk?" inquired Lady Sydmonton. "It is about a mile further, and there is a path nearly all the way; but if you don't feel inclined, we will go straight home, and take Lord Ballybrack with us, for he mustn't overtire himself, you know!"

But Lady Chetwynd professed herself quite ready for a walk; and the continued chaff of the ladies, together with various friendly offers of assistance in pulling him up, having at last roused the "Cadger" to the extent of getting on his legs, and adjusting the somewhat faded gardenia in his buttonhole, the party started to walk across the park, followed at

a respectful distance by Mr Jonas and his satellites.

The path led for some way through a wood, and Lady Sydmonton announcing that she would go first and show the way, nothing was more natural than that Gerard should spring forward to open a gate for her, and then continue by her side. Here was a good opportunity, he thought, and he determined to take advantage of it.

"By the way, Lady Sydmonton," he began, in the most unconcerned manner, "I never thanked you for introducing me to a first-rate partner last night. Miss Graham, I mean, a young lady in white, who was there with an old gentleman."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed her ladyship, "I quite forgot that I had introduced you to her. I am so glad you found her a good partner. She is a nice girl, I believe, but I really don't know much about her. She lives with Mr Baldwin, that old gentleman you saw, at a place called Netherdean, about six miles from Shawfield."

"Oh, really," said Gerard, with the utmost duplicity, as if the intelligence had been

imparted to him for the first time. "Then is she any relation of his, or what?"

"I really don't know," replied Lady Sydmonton, with a side glance at Gerard, her womanly instinct suggesting to her that his inquiries seemed of a rather more interested nature than was justified by a casual ball-room introduction. "No, I don't think she is any relation, but I have a sort of idea she is an orphan, and the daughter of an old friend of his. Anyhow, she has lived with him ever since she was quite a child, and he seems to look upon her more as a daughter than anything else. He is rather a funny old man, I believe; and some people say he has money, Mr Courtenay," with an arch little look at Gerard; "so perhaps Miss Graham may turn out to be an heiress, you know. Really, I think you had better go and call upon her!"

"Oh, well," replied Gerard, with a laugh, feeling perhaps rather relieved by Lady Sydmonton's light treatment of the subject, "I don't think it has quite come to that, Lady Sydmonton. But she really danced so well, and seemed so keen about it, that I felt quite

grateful to you for introducing me to such a pleasant partner."

"Well, it's a pity she lives so far from here, or you might have seen something more of her," said her ladyship. "But we are getting near the first pett now—the one with the peculiar name, you know,—and I suppose we ladies ought not to come much further, or Jonas will declare we are frightening the ducks." So a halt was called; and amid various protestations of regret from the sportsmen, the ladies, escorted by the "Cadger," branched off in another direction, and turned their faces homewards.

It is unnecessary, for the purposes of our story, to chronicle the exact number of ducks that were killed or missed on this particular occasion, or to inflict upon our readers a detailed account of the next two days' shooting. Suffice it to say, that after an extremely pleasant week at Sydmonton, by the expiration of which Mrs Fortescue had succeeded in making an enemy for life of Lady Chetwynd, and the united verdict of the other ladies had pronounced Captain Aylmer to be nothing more than a flirt, Gerard found himself once

more back in London in attendance on his chief, who had come up for a fortnight, for the joint purpose of clearing off any arrears of work that might have accumulated at the General Enquiry Office, and of vindicating his character as a Minister of the Crown by attending one or two Conservative meetings in and about the Metropolis.

But although Gerard had plenty of occupation, and entered keenly into his work after his week's holiday, he nevertheless found himself, to his surprise and annoyance, both ill at ease, and inclined to think about Miss Graham in a way that it seemed to him he had never indulged in regarding any girl before. He at first endeavoured to put himself to the test in this respect, and running over in his mind all the young ladies with whom he had from time to time fancied himself in love, he tried to remember whether he had ever experienced the same sensation before. For although our friend was not by any means peculiarly susceptible, and had been preserved, partly by temperament and partly by a wholesome devotion to active pursuits, from what is generally known as "mak-

ing a fool of oneself," it was hardly to be supposed that he could have "knocked about" London, even in the quietest manner, for five or six years, without falling in love, or, at any rate, persuading himself that he had done so. But when he came to compare his present feelings with those which he had experienced on previous occasions, he either found that his memory failed him to a remarkable extent, or that there were circumstances which rendered a comparison altogether inapplicable. So finding that very little advantage was to be gained by retrospection, he was obliged to make the best of his present position; and the natural result was a feeling of restlessness and discomfort that was very far from satisfactory. He took himself severely to task, and assured himself a dozen times a day that he was not in love with Miss Graham. But, reason as he would, a vision of a slight, girlish figure and a pair of soft wistful eyes would persist in intruding itself upon his thoughts in a manner that threatened to interfere very seriously with his peace of mind. First he would think of her in her simple white dress, with the quaint little

cross round her neck. Then he would call to mind how beautifully she danced, and the dreamy strains of the "Journalisten" valse would seem to ring in his ears. And then he would fancy her in her brown habit and hat, careering over the downs on the chestnut mare, or handling her over a fence with the harriers. Ah! she had good hands, there could be no doubt; and he was quite angry with himself for not being able to recollect exactly how she looked on horseback.

So altogether Gerard was at this period in anything but a comfortable frame of mind; and being the dead time of year, there were few of his friends in London, and nothing much in the way of social amusement to divert him from the one thought that was beginning to be uppermost. He began to feel as if he would be the better of some one to confide in—a dangerous symptom in itself,—and his thoughts gravitated towards Lady Mount-Easton. But she was of course away, entertaining, according to the *Morning Post*, a "select circle" of visitors at her father-in-law's place in the north of England. Under

any other circumstances, his next idea would have been to seek out his friend George Morton, and tell him all about it. But, somehow or other, on the present occasion he rather shrank from taking him into his confidence. In the first place, he felt sure that George would laugh at him, and turn the whole thing into ridicule; and although he did not exactly want to be seriously encouraged in the matter, he was not at all in the humour for being laughed at. Moreover, he had reason to believe that George was also out of London, and there was no one else of whom he was inclined to make a confidant. So he was compelled perforce to keep his secret to himself, and under these circumstances it was not surprising that he should find himself growing more and more restless every day.

But after about ten days of this very uncomfortable existence, by which time Gerard had almost given up attempting to persuade himself that he was not in love with Miss Graham, he could stand it no longer, and, thinking it odd that he had heard nothing lately from George Morton, he resolved that he would, at any rate, look him up, and

ascertain when he was likely to be back in London. With this object in view, he left home earlier than usual one morning, and repaired to his friend's lodgings in Hatfield Street, Strand.

CHAPTER XVI.

HATFIELD STREET.

HATFIELD STREET, STRAND, is not generally included among the resorts specially affected by the fashionable world. It will be looked for in vain in the "Court Guide," and other fashionable handbooks to London; and reference will have to be made to the Post Office Directory, with which, as opposed to the Peerage, that great sporting celebrity, Mr Jorrocks, was so wont to identify himself, before any authentic record of its inhabitants will be found. Yet, when one comes to compare it with other more favoured localities, it is difficult to understand why it should thus be left out in the cold, and why it has not attracted more notice and patronage from bachelors and others in search of an abode combining perfect quiet with air that, in comparison with that of many other districts, may fairly be described as fresh, and a position

that can hardly be called otherwise than central. The definition of this latter term is, of course, somewhat arbitrary, and must depend very much on the habits and associations of the person concerned; for what may appear to one man the very ideal of a central situation, may to another present the aspect of being completely without the pale of society. If, however, the fact of being within ten minutes' walk of the Pall Mall Clubs, the Houses of Parliament, the principal Government offices, and other notable institutions in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross, to say nothing of being almost within a stone's throw of some of the most popular theatres, can be admitted as any evidence of a central position, the claims of Hatfield Street can hardly in justice be passed over. And once reached, the superiority of the accommodation to that of the majority of the refuges for bachelors in the more sought after neighbourhood of St. James's Street and Pall Mall cannot fail to be recognised; for the houses, though old-fashioned, are solid and well built, and present the appearance of having been constructed with more idea to comfort than is

generally the case in more modern houses of the same type. Good, roomy staircases, with carved balustrades, lofty mantelpieces, and handsome oaken wainscoting, are constantly to be met with; and a humble bachelor, paying a modest weekly rent for a couple of rooms, may find himself accommodated with an apartment that would not be out of place in an old-fashioned country house. And as regards air and quiet, it would be difficult to find a locality more effectually combining these two great *desiderata* to all dwellers in London. Being a *cul-de-sac*, there is no traffic in the street itself, and although an offshoot of the noisy Strand, the narrow, bottle-necked entrance has the effect of shutting it out from the roar of wheels which, except in the case of those houses that are quite at the top of the street, merely takes the form of a subdued rumble, to which the ear soon gets accustomed, and the effect of which after a time is rather soothing than otherwise. And if there is such a thing as fresh air in London, Hatfield Street ought to get a fair share of it, for the lower and wider end is open to the river, from which it is only separated by the Thames Embankment, so

that any air that may be hanging about the water is almost certain to find its way into the street; while on a fine autumn day, when the tide is running up with an easterly breeze, an imaginative spectator, leaning over the railed terrace, might almost fancy himself on some seaside esplanade.

In this sequestered retreat George Morton had been established for the last three or four years, and, as he said, it suited him "down to the ground." "Hang St. James's Street!" he would say to those who expressed surprise that he had not chosen an abode in the neighbourhood of that more fashionable thoroughfare, "what good would that do me? I want a place where I can be quiet, and do as I like; and if people want me, they must come after me. Besides, I've got much more comfortable diggings here than I could get anywhere about there for the same money, and I'm close to the 'Cauliflower' and all the theatres. No; Hatfield Street for me!" And it must be confessed that, from his own point of view, there was much to be said in favour of his choice. He occupied the second floor of a roomy old house about three doors from the

river end of the street. From the windows of his sitting-room he had a view up a bend of the river as far as Westminster Bridge; and although the prospect from his bedroom was certainly not extensive, there was sufficient open space behind to insure an adequate supply of fresh air. The rooms, though rather low pitched, were of a very fair size, and bore traces of old-fashioned taste in their decoration. Morton was the owner of a quantity of more or less valuable books, bequeathed to him by a relative, which were ranged round the sitting-room in low book-shelves; the walls were enlivened by a few water-colour sketches; and various miscellaneous objects, such as foils, boxing-gloves, and a fair proportion of the odds and ends that are almost invariably picked up by any one who has resided abroad, filled up the vacant spaces.

Here Gerard betook himself one morning about a fortnight after his return to London, not by any means expecting to find his friend at home, but calculating on hearing from his landlady something as to his present address and probable future arrangements. To his surprise, however, he was informed by the

servant who opened the door, that Mr Morton had been back in London for the last week or more, and was at that moment upstairs. Upstairs, therefore, Gerard proceeded, and an unceremonious knock at the door was answered by the well-known voice of his friend.

"Why, George, old man," exclaimed Gerard as he entered, "I'd no idea you were up in London. Why didn't you look me up, or drop me a line, or something? I only looked in to ask where you were, and never expected to find you here."

"Well, for the matter of that," replied Morton, turning round from the fire, before which he was sitting, with a pipe in his mouth and the poker in his hand, a favourite position with him when not otherwise occupied, "I never supposed you were in London either. I took it for granted you were larking about somewhere in the provinces, or I might perhaps have come and looked you up at your office. However, I'm very glad to see you, old fellow. Have anything to drink, or smoke? No? Well, sit down, then, and let's hear what you've been doing."

Had not Gerard's mind been very much occupied with his own particular affairs, he might have observed a more than usually worn and anxious look about his friend's face, and might have been struck by a tone of sadness and depression about his voice that was not habitually there. But love—for that Gerard had now arrived at this stage he no longer cared to question—is proverbially selfish, and he took little notice of Morton's manner or appearance. So, after a few mutual inquiries and interchanges of their recent general experience, he came out with the subject that was uppermost in his thoughts.

"I say, George, old man," he began, with an affectation of unconcern that could have deceived few, and certainly did not impose upon his listener, "do you recollect that day last March when we were walking over the Southdowns, and came on some harriers in the afternoon somewhere near Middlehaven?"

Morton, who was at that moment engaged in lighting his pipe at the fire with the aid of the tongs and a small fragment of glowing

cinder, signified by a nod of his head that his memory so far served him as to carry him back to the period in question.

"Well then," continued Gerard, feeling as if he were about to make a confession of some flagrant misdemeanour, and conscious of appearing to the greatest possible disadvantage, "do you recollect an old chap on a grey, with a girl on a chestnut, who rode close past us when it was all over,—and Smut barked at them, you know, and the chestnut was all over the place?"

Morton, who had now got his pipe well under weigh, and was feeling the fire gently here and there with the poker, nodded a lazy assent, but made no remark.

"Well," proceeded Gerard, feeling every moment more and more uncomfortable, and half inclined to be angry with Morton for not manifesting a greater degree of interest in his story, "it's a very rum thing, but I met that girl at a ball the other day down at Shawfield. I was staying at Sydmonton, you know, and we went over a party from there."

"I don't see anything particularly rum in

your meeting her," observed Morton, somewhat dryly, "if you choose to go to a ball in what I suppose is her own country. Did you meet the old boy too?"

"Oh yes, he was there, right enough," replied Gerard impatiently; "but that's nothing to do with it. I say, George, did you notice her at all that day—I mean, do you recollect at all what she was like?"

"No," replied Morton, with the utmost tranquillity, and apparently in intense enjoyment of his pipe; "I'll be hanged if I do! Couldn't tell you what she was like if you gave me a hundred pounds. Let's think, though. Blue habit, hadn't she? and a green veil—no, that was a girl I saw somewhere else. Red habit, eh?—no, of course not, I mean red hair"——

"Hang it all, George!" broke in Gerard, indignant at this flippant treatment of a subject which was beginning to be of the utmost importance to him; "what's the use of talking such rot? No, bar sell, old fellow, I really wanted to talk to you about it—about her, I mean."

"Well, drive on," replied Morton resignedly;

"I'll listen as long as ever you like, provided you don't want me to talk about her too."

"Well then, as I was saying," continued Gerard, "I came across her at this ball"——

"And you got spooning her, I suppose," quietly remarked Morton, poising the poker dexterously on one finger.

"Well, George, old man," replied Gerard, feeling a certain sense of relief at having brought the conversation to a crisis, "I don't say that exactly, because I didn't; but I don't mind telling you, old fellow, that I have been thinking about her most awfully ever since; and it seems to me that I'm inclined to make a perfect fool of myself about her. You'll think me an awful ass, I know, but I can't help it; and it seems to me that I never thought about any girl in the same way before."

There was a silence of some moments, during which Morton puffed reflectively at his pipe, and Gerard sat staring at the fire.

"Well, George," at last remarked the latter, peevishly, "haven't you got anything to say to a fellow? Hang it! I thought anyhow

you'd be able to tell me what you thought about it either one way or the other, instead of sitting there half asleep over that beastly old pipe. Of course you think me a fool, but why the deuce can't you say so at once, and have done with it?"

Morton took the pipe from his mouth, and turning round in his chair, placed his hand gently, almost tenderly, on Gerard's shoulder.

"Jerry, my boy," he said, with a strange expression of softness in his voice, "why should I think you a fool? I don't know that a fellow is necessarily a fool because he falls in love with a girl; and I take it that's about what you've been doing, old boy, isn't it?"

"Well, George, old fellow," replied Gerard, touched and pleased by his friend's manner, "I suppose that really is about the truth of it, though it seems deuced odd. I didn't the least intend to, I'll take my oath," he continued, in an apologetic sort of way; "in fact, it was about the last thing I thought of doing. But it came all of a sudden, and it seems to me there's something about her

I never saw in any other girl before. Of course, you know, I've now and then been just a bit spooney on some girl or other, but I never felt anything like this, and I can tell you it's deuced uncomfortable."

"Well, Jerry, old boy," returned Morton, "it's all very well for you to talk as if it were something extraordinary; but, hang it all! I only wonder you haven't tumbled into something of this sort before. I've always thought you were just the chap to fall in love with some one. No, I don't mean any reflection on your wisdom," seeing Gerard was inclined to be huffy again, "but I mean to say, a young fellow like you, with a fair amount of good looks, and well enough bred, you know, and decently behaved on the whole, and all that sort of thing—why, it's the most natural thing in the world. I've no doubt she's charming, old chap, and I wish to goodness I could remember what she's like; but, as I said before, I couldn't do it to save my life."

"You're a good fellow, George," said Gerard, feeling somewhat relieved by his confession, "and I'm glad I've told you.

But, you know, the whole thing's deuced odd. Here's a girl I never set eyes on before, except just that once, and then never thought about her any more than you did; and yet, I run up against her at a ball, and ——well, there's no use beating about the bush, but I suppose I really have fallen in love with her, for I don't see what else it can be."

"Well, I suppose you're the best judge of that," replied his friend, not without a touch of his habitual cynicism, "and certainly you show every sign of it, I'm bound to say. But, if one might make so bold as to ask, what's going to happen next? I suppose you're not going to rush back to Shawfield, and propose off-hand, are you? By the way, you've never told me her name, old chap; one would like to know that, as it would make it all the more interesting, you know."

"Well, you see," rejoined Gerard, "all I know at present is that she is a Miss Graham; but I don't know her Christian name, worse luck. I couldn't well ask her straight off, you know, and, in fact, I never

thought about it till afterwards, and then there was no one to ask."

"Well, there's one advantage in that," observed Morton, sententiously. "You can think of her by any name you're particularly sweet upon. Let's see, now, begin at the beginning. A—Arabella, Araminta, Anna Maria"——

"Oh, no, George, that won't do!" responded Gerard, shaking his head ruefully. "No; I must just wait till I see her again, I suppose, though I don't quite see how that's to happen."

"Well," replied Morton, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "I'm afraid I can't help you there. But I suppose either you must go to her, or she must come to you. Perhaps she'll come up to London, and you'll meet her at a ball next season, by which time you'll probably have forgotten all about her."

"No, George," returned Gerard thoughtfully. "I don't mind your chaff; but I don't feel like forgetting her, I can tell you. No; she won't come up to London, I'm sure. I've just found out enough about

her to know that she lives in a very quiet way somewhere among the Southdowns with that old cove, who's her guardian, or adopted uncle, or something of the sort. No; if I'm to see her again, I shall have to go down there; but I couldn't very well do that, could I?"

"Well, that's according as you feel inclined," replied Morton. "This is a free country, so they tell me; and I don't suppose there's anything to prevent your going and fooling round there as well as anywhere else, if you like to do so. We might take another walk round that way next spring, and drop in on the old gentleman in a quiet way. But I suppose you couldn't wait so long as that, eh? I'll tell you what it is, though, old fellow, I must be off, if you don't mind. I've got to meet a man at the 'Cauliflower' at twelve, and it's now five minutes to."

"All right, old man," said Gerard, rising, "I'll come with you as far as the 'Cauliflower.' I needn't be at my shop till one to-day." So the two set out together, and crossing the Strand, proceeded to make

their way through the dingy and somewhat unsavoury streets in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, till they arrived at the comfortable though unpretentious - looking building which has for so long been known to its pretty numerous frequenters by the name of the Cauliflower Club.

Morton had not spoken since they left Hatfield Street, and Gerard, being pretty well occupied with his own reflections, had not evinced any desire for further conversation. But as they stopped at the door of the club, and Morton turned to him to say good-bye, he observed, for the first time, a peculiar appearance of sadness and trouble about his friend's face. The momentary animation produced by Gerard's recital had passed away, and an anxious, weary look had taken its place, which, even in his companion's preoccupied state, could hardly have passed unnoticed.

"Why, George, old fellow!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter? You don't look at all the thing. Hang it all, what a brute I am! I've been thinking so much about myself that I never noticed it before. Nothing gone

wrong, old boy, I hope?" he continued, looking anxiously into the handsome face, which, though still young-looking, showed unmistakable traces of recent care and sorrow. "By Jove! if I'd thought there was anything amiss, I wouldn't have come bothering you about my own affairs in this way."

Morton smiled—a melancholy, hopeless sort of smile—and placed his hand on the other's shoulder. "Jerry, my boy," he said, "we've all got our troubles, and of course I'm not without mine; but we won't talk about that now. Good-bye, old fellow; you won't come in here now, I know. God bless you, and don't be in too great a hurry about Miss Graham, or anybody else. Perhaps you're better off as you are." And with these parting words, which certainly seemed somewhat inconsistent with the sentiments he had expressed but a few minutes before in Hatfield Street, he disappeared through the swing-door of the club, leaving Gerard to pursue his walk towards Whitehall with somewhat mixed feelings. There was something wrong with Morton, evidently; but what could it be? "Curious fellow, George; always seemed a

sort of mystery about him; but what a good fellow, though! just the chap one wants to go and tell this sort of thing to. Poor old George! how I must have bored him, though, and how good he was about it! I wish I'd noticed before how bad he was looking. Shouldn't wonder if there was a woman at the bottom of it with him too. But he's a close fellow, George, and hates being asked about anything, so I'd better leave him alone."

And then his ideas reverted to his own particular concerns, and to the sweet girlish face that had begun to be the constant companion of his sleeping and waking thoughts. Somehow he felt much happier for having unbosomed himself to Morton, and it seemed to him as if the thing were now a reality, and he had, as it were, acquired a license to indulge freely in his romance. And as he passed along the busy Strand that morning, a new and undefinable feeling of hope arose within him, and he felt as if the world were somehow brighter than usual. So that he arrived at the General Enquiry Office in a more than usually happy frame of mind, greatly to the

relief of Lord Ravendale, who had noticed a certain amount of abstraction and pre-occupation about his private secretary for the last few days, and had been wondering what could be the matter.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN IDEA.

We feel certain that our readers must be anxious to hear something more of that worthy old gentleman, Mr Charles Courtenay, whom, together with his swallow-tailed coat, his urbane manners, and his general intense respectability, we had the privilege of introducing to them at an earlier stage of this story. It can hardly be supposed that an old public man of Mr Courtenay's standing could have been indifferent to his son's career in the public service. On the contrary, he had watched Gerard's progress with great interest, and had been much gratified at his selection by Lord Ravendale to fill the post of his private secretary. He had, moreover, taken to himself the entire credit of the transaction, and had hinted pretty plainly to his friends and acquaintances that his son's success was mainly due to his own personal influence and

public reputation. "Ah, yes," he would say, "my son is Lord Ravendale's secretary, and I am very pleased that it should have come about. Lord Allonby is one of my oldest friends, and I was very glad when his son was made Vice-President. Yes; it would have been strange if, under such circumstances, a son of mine had not been considered." The real fact being that the good old gentleman had never seen or spoken to Lord Ravendale in his life; and that, although it was so far correct that he had been introduced to Lord Allonby when that nobleman was Under-Secretary for International Affairs and he himself was an unpaid *attaché* at Stockholm, the acquaintance had never proceeded much further. And it is probable that if Lord Allonby had been questioned concerning Mr Charles Courtenay, he would have had some difficulty in recalling him to mind. Be this as it may, however, Mr Courtenay was perfectly satisfied that he had been mainly instrumental in obtaining for his son the appointment of private secretary to Lord Ravendale; and as this belief pleased him and did nobody any harm, it would perhaps have been difficult

to advance any substantial reason for objecting to it.

Mr Courtenay, as we have before stated, had, on retiring into the country, selected a locality in a remote corner of Somersetshire as being suited alike to his means and position. He occupied a comfortable, roomy house, with a good garden and a few acres of land, about half a mile from the little market-town of Clapstock, and was thus enabled to combine the dignity of a country gentleman with the advantages to be derived from a regular service of trains, a telegraph station, a few fairly good shops, and a perpetual flow of small local gossip. He, in fact, constituted a sort of connecting link between the county aristocracy and the local society of Clapstock; and being fully recognised and accepted by the one, was in consequence a great man in the eyes of the other.

This somewhat ambiguous position, although it might not have accorded with some men's ideas of what was altogether satisfactory, was entirely suited to Mr Courtenay; and he was never happier than when, after a dinner-party at Lord Bubbleton's, the great local

magnate who resided at Cleere Park, about six miles from Clapstock, or a day's shooting with Sir Thomas Blackacre, the Conservative member for the county, he would be driven into Clapstock in Lady Theodosia's pony-carriage about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the entire able-bodied population of that absurd little human bee-hive would be out on the *qui vive*, and either promenading the High Street or blocking up the counters of the enterprising tradesmen who, if one-half of their allegations were to be believed, had succeeded in transplanting the contents of Bond Street to Clapstock, to be retailed at something considerably below cost price, and at any rate for about half what they could be obtained for in London. On these occasions Mr Courtenay would have the pony-carriage halted conspicuously in the market-place, and landing majestically on the pavement in front of Towzer the stationer's shop—which was also the postal-telegraph office and the head-quarters of a somewhat obsolete though still struggling circulating library,—would enter the shop, and create a feeling of respectful curiosity among the circle of customers by

inquiring whether Lady Blackacre's carriage had been seen in Clapstock that afternoon ; or whether Lord Bubbleton, with whom he had an appointment at the chief constable's office, had left any message for him ; or he would engage affably in conversation with Mr. Muggeridge the attorney, or Mr. Byles the brewer, one or other of whom would probably be hanging about the market-place, and refer incidentally to the good day's shooting he had had the day before with Lord Bubbleton, and his surprise that he had not kept his appointment. So that, one way or another, he was sure to attract attention, and be pointed out to strangers as a man of position and mark.

Having launched both his sons upon the world, and got his only daughter well married, Mr Courtenay was by this time to a great extent freed from domestic cares, and was in a position to enjoy the *otium cum dignitate* to which, as a veteran public servant and a fairly successful parent, he might justly consider himself entitled. It must be confessed, however, that the narrowing of his domestic circle, while it had brought with it an almost entire

freedom from care, had not increased its liveliness; and it would, in fact, have been difficult to imagine a more hum-drum and uneventful existence than was led by Lady Theodosia and himself. For the neighbourhood, though respectable to the last degree, was not by any means lively; and when you had rung the changes on old Lord Bubbleton, Sir Thomas and Lady Blackacre, and the two or three other county families who resided within a radius of ten or twelve miles, but whose great object appeared to be to pass as little as possible of their time at their ancestral homes, the social resources of the district would be pretty well exhausted. And although a person in the unassailable position of Mr Courtenay might occasionally so far descend from the pedestal of county exclusiveness as to invite the brewer, who was of a cheerful and genial disposition, with a turn for comic singing, to dine with him at Bayford House, or even to drop in for an occasional rubber at the attorney's, such departures from the unwritten code of county etiquette could not be relied upon as affording anything but a very occasional relief to the deadly-liveliness that was

the normal condition of the social atmosphere of Clapstock and its neighbourhood.

It will readily be understood, therefore, that although Gerard was by no means an undutiful son, the attractions of the paternal abode were not such as to offer any great inducement to him to pass more time there than was consistent with a proper degree of attention to his father and mother. The distance from London, moreover, and the expense of the journey, were sufficient excuses for a young man whose means were somewhat limited; so that his visits during recent years had been confined to a week or so in the summer, when there was generally a little cricket going on, and perhaps a fortnight at Christmas, when some sign of life would be visible in the usually deserted mansions, and a mild interchange of festivities would take place between Hall and Park. At this time, too, the hospitality of the county magnates would blossom forth in the shape of formal and solemn shooting-parties, where one keeper would vie with another as to who should produce the greatest show of tame pheasants, and stout old gentlemen and

smart young guardsmen would stand, with their legs very wide apart, at the end of trim plantations, and blaze away till the very ground on which they stood reeked with smoke, and the empty cartridge-cases would be counted by the score. Gerard, being, as our readers have already had an opportunity of observing, a fairly good and steady shot, had been favourably noted as likely to be of use on such occasions, and although not, as a rule, included in Sir Thomas' best day, would be pretty certain to be asked to some of the minor events or "second times over;" while old Lord Bubbleton's keeper, who had almost the entire management of his master's shooting, would make a point of securing him whenever there were outside beats to be shot and pheasants stopped from getting away to neighbouring coverts, or when he knew that his lordship's party was not so constituted as to be likely to do him credit as regards the numbers of the slain. So whenever Gerard's visits home fitted in with the shooting fixtures of the neighbourhood, he was pretty sure of a certain amount of sport. But beyond the bare shooting,

there certainly was not very much to attract. Somehow or other, things seemed to hang fire in the Clapstock country in the way of social intercourse. There were, of course, a certain number of solid dinner-parties, where the same people met each other over and over again, and where small local topics were hammered out with a persistence worthy of a better cause. In former days, too, there had usually been a county ball at Christmas; but of late years this had come to an end from sheer inanition; and at the period we are speaking of no such entertainment had taken place for some time. Now and then some more than usually enterprising hostess would attempt a garden party, followed by a dance, and a momentary excitement would make itself felt in the neighbourhood. But such attempts, however praiseworthy, were not, as a rule, so successful as to invite repetition; and the young ladies of the district were wont to complain, not without some show of reason, that dancing was to them an exercise almost unknown.

It would have been difficult to indicate the precise reasons for this melancholy state

of things. Some said it was the want of eligible young men in the county, and certainly the leading families were somewhat deficient in this respect. Lord Bubbleton was a bachelor, and his heir a middle-aged man with a family, who resided in another part of the country; while Sir Thomas Blackacre's eldest and at present only eligible son had a fancy for being almost entirely abroad, and was rarely seen in his paternal halls; and out of the few remaining county families who composed the aristocracy of the Clapstock district, there appeared to be no available young man who displayed any particular qualification for taking the lead in social affairs. Others attributed it to the circumstance that none of Lady Blackacre's numerous daughters were yet "out," and prophesied that things would be different when a few more years should have launched one or two Miss Blackacres upon the fashionable world. But whatever may have been the cause, the effect was very apparent, and it would have been impossible to deny that society in the Clapstock county was somewhat dull. It required great inducement to attract any one

from outside; and the smart guardsmen who would occasionally be enticed by the good shooting offered them by Lord Bubbleton or Sir Thomas, could rarely be got to stay longer than was necessary for the purposes of their sport, and would often find that the calls of duty required them to go back to London by the mail train on the night of the last day's shooting.

It was not wonderful, then, that Gerard, who by this time had had opportunities of becoming acquainted with one or two really cheerful and sociable country-house circles in other parts of the kingdom, was not disposed to bestow more of his leave upon Bayford House than was called for by his sense of filial duty. But although the duration of his visits might be short, they were of pretty regular occurrence; and finding, about a week after the conversation with George Morton, recorded in the last chapter, that his chief contemplated being absent from London for the greater part of the next month, and that his services therefore were not likely to be much in requisition during that period, he resolved to go

home at once; and having telegraphed one morning to announce his arrival, found himself the same evening seated at dinner with his father and mother, who were only too delighted to see him. For the first few days the change undoubtedly did him good, and had the effect of distracting him from the one subject that had of late completely engaged his thoughts. Lord Bubbleton's "big shoot," lasting over three days, was just coming off, and two of his guns had failed him at the eleventh hour. There was no time to procure suitable substitutes of the usual calibre of his lordship's shooting guests; and the great Mr Spruce, his lordship's keeper, was in despair, when by a lucky chance he happened to hear through Mr Courtenay's coachman, who had gone in to Clapstock with Lady Theodosia's pony-carriage, and had mentioned the circumstance to one of the Cleere grooms who was hanging about the "Red Lion," that Gerard was coming home that evening. Mr Spruce, who was a man of action, went straight to his lordship, and imparted to him his opinion that the only chance

of saving the forthcoming "chasse" from being a failure was to secure Gerard at once. So that a note arrived at Bayford House just as dinner was over, expressing Lord Bubbleton's hope that Gerard would come over and shoot each day at Cleere, or, if more convenient to him, would come and stop in the house.

For the next three days, therefore, Gerard had plenty of occupation, and while engaged in "pulling down" Lord Bubbleton's pheasants, or imbibing his lordship's justly celebrated Lafitte, his thoughts were either entirely diverted from Miss Graham, or she would only come before his mind's eye in the form of a pleasing vision that made his present enjoyment all the keener. But there soon came a reaction. When once Lord Bubbleton's "shoot" was over, there appeared no immediate prospect of any further sport, though he found himself invited to one or two minor "chasses" that were to come off later. For the next week or so, therefore, it seemed likely that he would be thrown upon his own resources. There was absolutely no hunting in the Clapstock country, the nearest pack of

hounds, and that a very indifferent one, being barely accessible to even the keenest of sportsmen, or Gerard might have brought down his horse, or rather horses, for he was now the proud possessor of two hunters. So, after two or three days at home with nothing particular to do, he found himself relapsing into the same restless and unsatisfactory state of mind as before. He felt unable to settle down to anything, and his one absorbing thought was an overpowering desire to see Miss Graham again. And after all, why should he not see her? There she undoubtedly was, and Morton's chance remark, that there was nothing to prevent him from "fooling round" in that direction, as he had irreverently expressed it, recurred forcibly to his mind. But he could not possibly wait till the following spring; that was altogether out of the question. No, he must see her at once; but how and where, and on what possible pretext? He could not propose another visit to Sydmonton so soon; and moreover, Lady Sydmonton would guess his intention in a moment, which would never do. He knew no one else in that country, and he must have

some sort of headquarters, and some ostensible reason for being there. Suddenly a brilliant idea struck him. There was hunting down there; not only the harriers, but the well-known Underdown foxhounds, a most respectable and sporting pack, and one that, although hardly calculated to attract a sportsman from Leicestershire, was nevertheless well worth the attention of an unattached London gentleman of humble means and with a limited stud. Gerard seized on the idea eagerly. It was the very thing. He would go down like Mr Sawyer when he went to the shires, or Mr Bunting, of "Plain or Ringlets" notoriety, and he would be quite certain to fall in with Miss Graham somehow or other. Already he saw himself in fancy giving her a lead over a fence, or fishing her out of a brook, or rendering her some other service which could not fail to advance him in her good graces. But where should he establish himself and his valuable stud? It would be a case of going to a country inn somewhere, and the question was, which would be the nearest point to the abode of his lady-love where he could take up his quarters on a reasonable pretext of

hunting? Netherdean, Lady Sydmonton had told him, was the name of the place, and Miss Graham herself had said it was six miles from Shawfield. Well, Shawfield ought to do well enough. It must be in the Underdown country, and anyhow it would be possible to get to the meets from there. There was the hotel where the ball had been; there was sure to be some decent stabling there, and it would be nice to think that she had actually been in the house. It was rather a public sort of place, to be sure, and if the Sydmontons were to hear of his being there, wouldn't they think it rather odd? And then, too, the charges would be sure to be ruinous. However, he would try it anyhow at first, and might perhaps find some quieter place afterwards. The great thing was to get on the spot as quickly as possible.

All this, and a good deal more, passed through Gerard's brain as he sat up alone one night smoking a pipe in the kitchen at Bayford House, and becoming every moment more and more excited with the picture which his imagination had conjured up. He had before him, as we have said, the prospect of two or

three weeks' leave, respecting which he had as yet made no definite plans. He had now got two horses, and would naturally be looking out for some hunting. He was not generally invited to Storrington till after Christmas; and at this time of year what could be more natural than that he should run down to the Underdown country for a fortnight? Everything, in fact, seemed to point to his doing so; and he almost succeeded in persuading himself that there was a special providence in the matter. He certainly felt a little remorseful when he thought of his father and mother, and the necessity that would arise for cutting short his visit to them. But he had not come down for any specified time, and they were accustomed to his being summoned up to London at short notice for attendance on his chief. It was true that he could not plead this as a valid excuse at that moment; but there was always work of some kind or other going on which must pass through his hands, and he must find a reason somehow. And he endeavoured to quiet his slight twinges of conscience in this respect by resolving to come down again to Bayford House at Christmas,

or perhaps earlier. In the meantime he would write at once to Martin, and tell him to be ready to start with the horses in two or three days. But the mention of Martin requires a word or two of explanation, which we will reserve for another chapter.

END OF VOL. I.

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